

Obesity and under-nutrition: An African paradox

Undernutrition is still the most important underlying factor causing high infant and child mortality in Africa, according to the first *African Regional Health Report: The Health of the People*, which was published late last year.

Citing demographic and health surveys published in the 10-year period 1988–1999, the Report says that the prevalence of low birth weight in sub-Saharan Africa ranges from 11% to 52%. Between 30% and 40% of children suffered from stunting due to chronic undernutrition, and 10% suffered from emaciation or wasting due to acute undernutrition. Half of the children aged under five years were iron deficient and one-quarter were deficient in vitamin A. Between 4% and 40% of women of child-bearing age were underweight. The highest prevalence of undernutrition in adults was found among displaced people, including refugees. Young smokers are at risk throughout the Region.

Early childhood undernutrition may be a risk factor for non-communicable diseases in adulthood, particularly when coupled with lifestyle changes such as high consumption of sugars, fats and reduced physical activity. The African Region has seen an alarming increase in obesity since the early 1990s, the Report says. The trend towards an unhealthy diet rich in saturated fat, sugar and salt and poor in fruit and vegetables means that in some countries, such as South Africa and Kenya, children are overweight but malnourished because they are receiving more than enough calories but not enough necessary nutrients to grow into healthy adults.

Moreover type 2 diabetes, for which obesity is a major risk factor, is

increasing rapidly in the Region, with almost one-quarter of middle-aged people being affected in wealthier African countries such as Mauritius and Seychelles.

In order to address this, the Report says that government-led action at the population level is needed to regulate the marketing of unhealthy foods and to promote healthy lifestyles. One obvious course of action is to regulate the amount of salt and sugar in foods, particularly those heavily marketed towards young people. Improved labelling of foods can also be beneficial, while the fortification of staple foods with micronutrients such as vitamin A is another key strategy.

Source: www.who.int

Nutrition Congress 2006



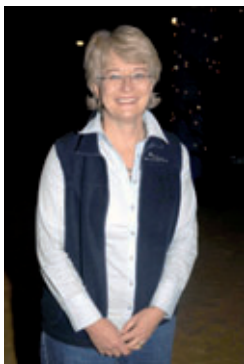
The well-attended and excellently organised 21st Biennial Nutrition Congress held on behalf of the Nutrition Society of South Africa (NSSA) and the 9th Biennial Congress of the Association of Dietetics of South Africa (ADSA) took place at the Feather Market Centre in Port Elizabeth from 24 to 27 September 2006. The theme of the congress was 'Surfing for knowledge' and incorporated parallel sessions, master classes, two social events as well as a trade exhibition.

Invited national and international speakers addressed a number of major issues in the nutrition field ranging from bridging the ARV nutrition gap to nutrition and human rights, micronutrients, the role of nutrition in chronic disease and its

prevention, life-cycle issues, evidence-based nutrition practices and research, food safety as well as functional foods and alternative therapies. The master classes updated delegates on recent developments in nutrigenomics, the metabolic syndrome and management of risk factors, the application of information and communication in nutrition, allergies, the use of the food composition tables, inflammatory bowel disease and sports nutrition. The social programme was innovative for its location and approach and well enjoyed by those who participated.



Scenes from the Nutrition Congress 2006.



The ADSA/Flora Award for support and promotion of the continued growth of the profession of dietetics in South Africa over the past 5 years was bestowed on Dr Edelweiss Wentzel-Viljoen. Dr Wentzel-Viljoen has been the driving force behind the concept of continuing professional development (CPD) for dietetics and was instrumental in the initiation and implementation of the system in the

country. CPD is widely considered as the cornerstone of any profession and not only has Dr Wentzel-Viljoen, together with others, enabled the dietetic profession to be the forerunner with this system and an example to other health professions, but also ensured that the professional association, ADSA, has taken the lead in the field of professional development.



The Nutrition Society of South Africa award for exceptional long-term contributions to nutritional science was bestowed on Dr Pieter Jooste of the Medical Research Council. Dr Jooste realigned his research interests from cardiovascular epidemiology to investigating the problems of undernutrition, with a particular interest in the latter field being iodine nutrition

on a national scale. The current focus of Dr Jooste's research is on supporting salt producers towards optimal iodisation of table salt, assessing the iodine status of mothers and children, and, in collaboration with Swiss scientists, investigating the possible interaction between vitamin A and iodine supplementation in terms of thyroid function.