

Preface

Protein energy malnutrition substantially increases morbidity and mortality due to infectious diseases and impairs physical growth and perhaps cognition. Many of these effects are now known to be related to deficiency of specific nutrients. The focus in the past has been on individual micronutrients. It now appears that several micronutrients may be deficient in mothers and children in developing countries. The need to summarize the magnitude of micronutrient deficiencies, assess their consequences on health and consider interventions for prevention has been raised in many fora.

An Indo-European symposium on micronutrients, maternal and child health was held in Goa, India, 25–27 April 1999. Scientists, physicians and public health specialists from India, Nepal, Europe and the United States of America reviewed the micronutrient status of children and women in developing countries, particularly South Asia, and debated the research and programmatic agenda for the future.

This meeting was timely for several reasons. Low birth weight continues to be a major problem in developing countries despite many nutrition programs. There is a view that providing many limiting micronutrients together may contribute to reducing the prevalence of low birth weight to a greater extent than by single micronutrient-based interventions. A discussion on this issue has gained added importance due to increasing evidence suggesting that fetal growth retardation may have severe consequences in adult life in terms of an increase in the occurrence of chronic degenerative diseases. For these reasons, a number of speakers at the conference dealt with multiple micronutrient

deficiencies. With regard to early childhood, the many exciting findings on the infection preventive and therapeutic role of zinc supplementation in populations where deficiency is likely to be common were reviewed and the research and programmatic implications discussed. Also in this context, multiple micronutrient deficiency was an important focus.

With the exception of iodine and in some regions vitamin A, intervention programs for reducing deficiency of other micronutrients such as iron, folic acid and B-vitamins have not been entirely successful.

At the conference, experiences from programs were critically analyzed and progress in food fortification and other ways of delivering micronutrients to deficient populations were discussed. It is hoped that the deliberations of the conference summarized in this supplement will be of interest to physicians, nutritionists, and others in the public health arena.

The meeting was sponsored by the European Commission (EU INCO-DC program, grant ERBIC18CT979093), with additional support from NUFU (PRO 52-53/96) and NORAD (Ind-040) while the costs for publishing this supplement were covered by EU INCO-DC grant no. (ICA4-1999-50020). We would like to thank Bharat Tandon, Mahip Tandon, Manju Badgwal, Tonje Skaar and Solveig Ullaland for excellent administrative support. The support of the Department of Science and Technology and Indian Council of Medical Research is acknowledged.

New Delhi and Copenhagen, January 2001
Maharaj K. Bhan, Halvor Sommerfelt