

## EDITORIAL

### Tribes and Professions

Science is, for the most part, an anti-social activity whereby small groups of people devote most of their time to the pursuit of their own specialist interests. We come together at conferences but mainly to parade our own talents, pick up useful tips and size up the opposition. As we enter academic middle age, however, we run an increasing risk of being diverted from the fierce and solitary pursuit of science towards committees and peer review panels. These are often considered a chore but they do force us to give serious attention to the interests and aspirations of other people. Teaching undergraduates offers a milder form of therapy but it lacks the element of competition and so of threat.

Sometimes I call myself a nutritionist, sometimes a veterinary surgeon. When it is the former I have, in the past, expanded that definition to say that I study the physiology of digestion and metabolism in animals. On assuming the Presidency of The Nutrition Society I was at once exposed to people practising a far wider range of disciplines, all of which could (to my view) properly be called nutrition. These included human dietitians and animal feed technologists, both concerned with nutrient supply; physiologists and biochemists studying digestion, metabolism, growth, lactation and ageing, all concerned with nutrient requirement and availability; epidemiologists concerned with the impact of nutrients on the aetiology of disease; and clinicians concerned with nutrient requirement and supply for the sick patient. All this was very exciting.

I was also confronted by the need to find politically correct answers to three deceptively simple questions. 'What is a nutritionist? How do you become one?' and 'What can you do?'. The first question was prompted by the need to define qualifications for entry to the Register of Accredited Nutritionists, the second by the Institute of Biology review, 'Training of Nutritionists' and the third by the need to define a role for the Nutrition Task Force in implementing the objectives of the *Health of the Nation* White Paper. There was also the need to retain (or indeed, recover) the interest and allegiance of animal nutritionists both for the society and for this journal. In reviewing these questions for this Editorial I must emphasize that the views which I express are my own; I am not writing *ex officio*.

No sooner did I step out of the shallows of my own special interests and enter these broader waters than I was struck by wave upon wave of what can only be called scientific tribalism. Each group will confidently proclaim what it takes to be 'a proper nutritionist' but usually by way of definitions designed more to erect stockades around their own spheres of special interest than to embrace our collective aim to help to feed the world. Such talk is, of course, usually conducted in code so that in the argot of one tribe 'clinical' becomes 'unscientific'; in another, 'basic' becomes 'unusable'. I am also baffled by the argument that nutrition only takes place inside the body and so excludes research on food characterization and food technology. All this suggests that we who are members of The Nutrition Society are not really trying to establish a common identity.

One of the reasons given for this is that nutritionists have no professional body, established by Royal Charter, to define our capabilities and promote our interests; i.e. give us a single flag under which we can all rally. On the whole my personal sympathies are with Shaw, G. B., (a fine-flavoured writer when taken with a pinch of salt) who condemned all

professions as 'conspiracies against the lay public'. However, there is a clear need to define the status of the nutritionist for the soundest of professional reasons, namely to protect the public from quackery. Nutritional quackery, i.e. the unscrupulous, or simply uninformed promotion of new diets, health foods etc., offers particularly attractive opportunities to the entrepreneur since it exploits those most powerful commodities, ignorance, vanity and fear. I would add that this problem is not unique to human nutrition. Horse owners are being ripped off in much the same way and for much the same reasons.

It is for this reason that the Council of The Nutrition Society is working with The Institute of Biology to redefine, improve and promote the Register of Accredited Nutritionists. The intention is to ensure that government, educators, the media and other opinion formers have easy access to an up-to-date record of human and animal nutritionists stating their qualifications and specialist experience. This is not the same as professional status (and professional status itself is not an absolute guarantee of competence) but it will go a long way towards achieving its primary and most honourable objective, namely the protection of the public.

The first criterion for acceptance to the Register must be a proper qualification. Here again, however, there is a danger of invoking tribalism into the interpretation of this obvious and admirable objective. There were, for example, objections (now overcome) to the admission of Animal Feed Technologists to the Register. While it may be inappropriate for an animal feed technologist to give professional advice relating to the health of the nation, it is no more nor less inappropriate for a dietitian to devise a least-cost ration for a dairy cow. The new Register will spell out more clearly the scope and limitations of its individual members under the broad umbrella that is nutrition. The second danger (in my opinion) is to apply restrictive practices to the training of nutritionists. By this I mean that the route to becoming a nutritionist should not necessarily require a first degree wholly or substantially devoted to nutrition. The argument that the science and practice of nutrition can be instilled equally effectively at the postgraduate level, after a first degree in (e.g.) biochemistry, gains strength from the recent white paper giving increased emphasis to the taught MSc course as a route into useful science as a creator of wealth and quality of life. It will be essential to incorporate proper postgraduate training in, and support for nutritional science within, the corporate plans of the new research councils, in particular the Biotechnology and Biological Research Council.

If you feel at this stage that I am getting at you and favouring some other group then you have missed the point. What I am saying is that none of us should assume that the way of our particular tribe is the best way, still less the only way.

What then is a nutritionist? I define nutrition for my students as the science and practice that employ a common currency (namely nutrients) to match the requirements of animals (including man) for energy and chemicals necessary for life and health to the capacity of food to provide them. A nutritionist is therefore anyone who has the qualifications and experience to advance this science, put it into practice or both. I repeat, this is a very broad umbrella and no single tribe should seek to hog it for themselves. I am proud to call myself a nutritionist, not to curry favour within a particular scientific clique but to define myself as a useful contributor to the welfare of the family of man and other animals.

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