

Special report

Training in Public Health Nutrition: symposium at the 17th International Congress of Nutrition, Vienna

This session was an important opportunity to debate the concepts surrounding education and training in Public Health Nutrition. Co-chairs Drs Margetts¹ (UK) and Wade (Senegal) focused attention on this theme, highlighting the main purpose that shapes specialist education in Public Health Nutrition is to produce capacity for research, leadership, planning policy and programmes that benefit public health. Brief mention was made of the Nutrition Society's British schemes that register competent individuals and accredit courses that develop competence consistent with registration in Public Health Nutrition². This initiative stimulated a project to develop a European Masters in Public Health Nutrition with European Commission funding; part of a strategy to develop capacity in a range of aspects of European public health³. Nearing completion, this project expanded the scope of Public Health Nutrition to explicitly include physical activity, which is implicit to the British definition. In Europe, this commitment is natural and coincides with ongoing British efforts to develop the public health function by developing a career for non-medical specialists. Against this background, there has been muted discussion in Europe about the merits of Public Nutrition rather Public Health Nutrition.

We now know that this is also true in Latin America. Solomons⁴ reported on a survey among colleagues to find out what Latin American nutritionists call themselves and what their area of core work is. The most popular option was Public Health Nutrition; not Public Nutrition, Community Nutrition, or any other alternative. Overviews of syllabuses for Masters courses from Senegal⁵, Europe^{2,3}, and Latin America⁴ showed remarkable similarity in conception and scope. Dr Wade acknowledged encouragement from international nutritionists to start the first francophone African Masters in Nutrition.

Unsurprisingly, Professor John Waterlow provided some encouragement. Among Waterlow's towering achievements in Nutrition is institution building. Unusually, the MRC Unit agreed to sustain the Tropical Metabolism Research Unit (TMRU) within the University of the West Indies after Waterlow left. TMRU has since had three West Indian directors. TMRU and the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, where Waterlow was also head of department, have been offering MScs in Nutrition for 30 years. So why not Senegal? This was not

the occasion to answer this question, nor could the delegates consider more broadly what factors have enabled some lower income countries in Latin America⁴, the Caribbean and Anglophone Africa (for example, Kenya) to sustain nutrition research and specialist professional education in Public Health Nutrition for many decades. The session indicated that the support and encouragement of charismatic individuals, links with beacon institutions in the metropolises were and remain positive influences. This must go some way to explaining why participants share common conceptions of the epistemology of and institutions in, Public Health Nutrition. Continuity is surely helpful, but is there a risk that by itself it sets levels of achievement lower than our public need and deserve?

This is of course the real challenge to professional educators, whether their courses are new or longstanding. How to create *more* capacity for *better* quality, evidence-based professional practice that has more *positive* impact on the Public Health. Whether or not we can identify with Public Nutrition, everyone aims to increase social justice and inclusion¹. Ten years since Berg's indictment of the nutrition community, the development of networks for research and training to improve nutrition programmes, many changes in the discourses of professional and higher education, the challenge is more pressing than ever before. It is politically and ethically imperative to engage in evidence-based specialist education in Public Health Nutrition. This means answering the question 'to what extent are we preparing a cadre or profession that meets national needs for human resources to provide explicit levels and types of services?'

Hughes⁶ presented detailed findings from part of an extensive study in Australia that seeks to answer this question systematically. He described the nature of the specialist Public Health Nutrition workforce in Australia. Hughes' work and methods build on US experience, where surveys and interviews have mapped and scoped the Public Health workforce (for example, Haughton *et al*⁷). This is an evidence base for strategic planning to develop new specialist practitioners and to plan relevant continuous professional development for existing Public Health Nutrition staff. In due course, Hughes and his colleagues' work make valuable contribution to international discussion about what is meant by 'capacity' in a

setting other than the USA, so that we can better see how to compare one setting with another. This 17th IUNS Congress featured Africa Focus sessions that highlighted the vital importance of capacity-building in order to deliver more and better services to this most disadvantaged continent – a challenge that deserves further debate in the terms explored in this session.

Other presentations described current applied research projects at practitioner and technical levels. For example, one was to teach nutrition to doctors in Egypt so that they could take a population approach to community health and nutrition services⁸ and another was a community development project that combines professional education with service delivery in a Brazilian favela⁹ – a venture that seems to address the ‘how’ question. There was not enough time to explore the extent to which this approach is also used in Senegal, Europe, Australia, or indeed in Latin America.

Delegates left the Congress with questions about how to better define functionality in specialist training in Public Health Nutrition and how to gain more from the wealth of experience in the many other projects and wide range of practice in specialist professional education in their own and other countries. Delegates therefore pledged to use the pages of *Public Health Nutrition* to report their research, to debate, analyse, and explain their findings, to better learn from each other, to network, and to actively contribute to the knowledge base of Public Health Nutrition.

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