

## Book reviews

*Food and Nutritional Supplements: Their Role in Health and Disease.* Edited by J.K. Ransley, J.K. Donnelly and N.W. Read. Berlin Heidelberg New York: Springer-Verlag. ISBN 3-540-41737-0

The link between diet and health is well established and dietary manipulation, whether foods or supplements, is widely employed to help treat and prevent disease. With increased public awareness of both established and less established links between nutrition and disease, never before have so many free-living individuals taken self-prescribed dietary supplements, ranging from minerals and multivitamins to garlic and ginseng.

This book reviews the evidence for the benefits of dietary supplements and is a valuable resource for any health professional.

The book essentially covers two areas: why are individuals in western populations taking more and more self-prescribed supplements and is there the scientific evidence to back their use? The first few chapters deal with the first issue. It appears that individuals in western populations are sceptical about the nutritional content of their diet, perceiving it to be over-processed, lacking in nutrient quality and quantity. By taking supplements, they see this as a short cut to better nutrition. Ironically, it appears to be the more health conscious individuals who take supplements, those with already high nutrient intakes and unlikely to need supplementation. The placebo effect of supplementation is a very interesting issue and is also discussed. The author indicates that the fast pace of our modern life results in many stress-related symptoms and feelings of ill health. It is to alleviate these 'illnesses', which are 'underpinned by emotional distress', that the placebo effect of the supplement is most effective. Dietary-supplement companies may therefore be making vast profits from those more vulnerable in the population. The author also highlights the serious point that, at present, supplements are classified as foods, not medicines, and are therefore not subjected to the same regulations in terms of claims.

The book is an excellent resource for information on up-to-date research on various key issues in the role of supplementation. The chapter on antioxidants and health describes the role of free radicals in disease, such as cancer and CHD and the modulating effect of antioxidants. The use of vitamin B<sub>6</sub> supplementation is discussed in relation to homocysteine metabolism, impaired glucose tolerance, depression, pre-menstrual syndrome, and hypertension, concluding that there is little evidence to show that higher levels of vitamin B<sub>6</sub>, above that recommended to prevent deficiency, has any beneficial effect, except perhaps for the relief of pre-menstrual syndrome symptoms. Evidence for folic acid supplementation is good, and the author highlights the importance of adequate folic acid

intakes for the whole population. It is concluded that in order to ensure adequate intakes we should follow the lead of the USA in the fortification of flour with folic acid.

Throughout the book it is emphasised that the addition of micronutrients to foods or the prescription of dietary supplements must be driven by robust scientific evidence. Many epidemiological studies have shown associations between various dietary factors and health outcomes, but they are often not apparent in subsequent intervention studies. This is especially apparent in the chapters on the role of probiotics and prebiotics in health, and the role of phyto-oestrogens in health, both relatively new areas of research. Saying that, the authors present the evidence clearly and systematically, enabling the reader to understand the complexities of the subjects and the related research. The final two chapters review the evidence for dietary supplements in prevention and treatment of heart disease, and the role of fish-oil supplements in rheumatoid arthritis. The former chapter contains a discussion of the role of fish, nuts, fibre and antioxidants in alcohol in protecting against CHD. The latter chapter contains a comprehensive description of the role of fatty acids in the diet, their interaction with the immune system and the clear evidence showing the significant clinical improvements in symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis with fish-oil supplementation.

I have used this book as a resource many times already in my capacity as a lecturer in nutrition. In fact, the very day I received it, a colleague borrowed it for information on evidence for the effectiveness of prebiotics. It is clearly written and well referenced. This book would be excellent for all health professionals and, as highlighted in the book, many health professionals do not feel confident in areas of nutrition. With the increasing public demand for nutritional information from health professionals, this book would be a very valuable resource.

Sandra Drummond.

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*Poverty Bites: Food, Health and Poor Families.* Elizabeth Dowler and Sheila Turner with Barbara Dobson. London: CPAG. 2001. £9.95. xi + 135 pp. ISBN 1 901698 45 9

Explanations for the disparity in rates of diet-related ill health between different income groups in the UK are often made from differing perspectives. This book provides a thoughtful summary of the causes and consequences of food poverty. It challenges the approaches that have been used to address the health inequalities resulting from an

inadequate diet, and raises many questions for everyone concerned with food and its importance to health.

The opening chapter introduces the concept of food poverty by reference to the United Nations term 'food security'. The term embraces the idea that food poverty is not just about having enough money to buy appropriate and sufficient food. In addition food policy makers need to address people's access to healthy food, which is also culturally and socially acceptable and sustainable in the future.

In the next chapter, quantitative and qualitative data from a variety of sources are used to describe the causes of food poverty. Consideration is given to the amount of money that people have to buy food and whether they have access to the types of shop that sell the sort of food that is appropriate for their nutritional health. The appropriateness of school meals as a way of addressing food poverty in children is also examined. The chapter concludes with a short section about food usage. Whether what people decide to eat is influenced by a possible lack of cooking skills has not been the focus of much research according to the authors.

The links between food and health are emphasised in the third chapter. Using food survey evidence, the diets eaten by poorer households are assessed for nutritional adequacy. This chapter highlights the short- and long-term health effects of the lower nutrient intakes of low-income households throughout the life course. The information in this chapter will be well recognised by those working in the field of nutrition and dietetics. How these data are used to underpin strategies designed to tackle food poverty is more likely, I believe, to be influenced by the viewpoint from which the interpretation is made. What is already being done, and the future challenges for addressing food poverty, forms the central theme for the final two chapters (chapters 5 and 6). These chapters occupy nearly half the content of this small book.

Before considering the substance of the final two chapters I want to specifically refer to chapter 4. This chapter, entitled 'Managing to eat on a low income', is just six pages long. For me this chapter is pivotal to the analysis of food poverty and it is therefore a pity that the topics included in it are considered in such an insubstantial way. I appreciate that addressing the reasons why people choose to eat what they do may be beyond the scope of this book. Alluding to the area of food choice just from the perspective of low income does however seem to provide some ammunition for people who might take a

different viewpoint from that of the authors. Whether more money will necessarily result in the purchase of healthier food is a conundrum. Reliance on 'convenience' foods in low-income families is not solely attributable to lack of money. The same phenomenon occurs in middle-class families, but here it is more likely to be explained by lack of time. The 'proper meal', that is, one containing meat and two vegetables, could possibly be the ideal independent of income.

The penultimate chapter examines recent and current initiatives designed to tackle food poverty. Intervention to address food poverty has largely been based on an underlying assumption that people eat inappropriate diets because they do not have adequate budgeting and cooking skills, or lack nutritional knowledge. Policy documents recently have referred to the part that poverty and deprivation plays in ill health and mortality. In practice, community-based food initiatives are still the favoured option for tackling food poverty. Anyone involved in such an initiative, and policy makers, should reflect on the thought-provoking analysis put forward in this chapter.

In the final chapter key areas for reducing food poverty are identified. These are income, access to food, supporting community food projects, protecting mothers and babies, and promoting and enabling good food for children. The emphasis on individuals and communities, highlighted in the existing schemes referred to in the previous chapter, is broadened to include structural factors influencing food choice. The responsibility of government in addressing income levels, in planning laws, in institutional food provision and in food production and retailing is emphasised as being a crucial key to any reduction in food poverty.

I think that this book should be fundamental reading for anyone involved in activities designed to tackle food poverty. With a plethora of relatively short-term initiatives to counter the health effects of an inadequate diet, consideration of a broad perspective could provide a much-needed balance to schemes in which individual behaviour is the main focus. In addition to this pertinent text, some reading in the area of why people eat what they do would, I believe, equip those working in the field of nutrition and dietetics with a well-balanced viewpoint from which to plan food improvement interventions.

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