

Introduction to the second issue of World Nutrition for 2019

This time, in some cases I will explore some broader issues relevant to papers in this issue as I briefly introduce them.

The late Prof Hans Rosling, the genius behind <https://www.gapminder.org/>, was my office mate at Uppsala University for several years. He was a physician but did his PhD on a nutrition-related topic, the discovery and characterization of konzo, a disease caused by consumption of inadequately processed bitter (cyanide-containing) cassava. I often decried to him the way physicians commonly had decision-making roles when it came to working in the real world with public health nutrition issues. He agreed, often shocking other doctors by pointing out that an MD was actually just a type of bachelor's degree, providing no familiarity with research methods. Equally shocking, he said nutrition was far too complex for doctors to comprehend. Sadly, only a genius among physicians achieves that level of understanding.

I once drove a man who was setting up the curriculum for the first medical school in Yemen to his hotel. On the way I took the opportunity of saying, "This gives you a chance to ensure that, in a country suffering from so much malnutrition, the topic of nutrition is actually included in doctors' training." He looked at me, confused, and said, "Well, everyone knows how to eat." That's the view of nutrition we have to put up with all too often in the field.

But it's even worse than that. To those working in allied fields—for example, clinical nutrition, biochemistry, food science and technology, molecular nutrition—public health nutrition looks superficial. Yet the opposite is true. They don't realize that while they need to concentrate on only one field, we need to be familiar with many to do a good job.

In this journal, over only the past two years, many of our papers have rightly focused on core issues in our field such as famine, human rights, food security and food sovereignty, non-communicable diseases, nutrient deficiencies, issues related to nutrition in emergencies, infant feeding, nutrition training in higher education, nutrition programs and policies, community-based nutrition programming, and the food industry and its misbehavior. But we have also offered our readers papers to help provide a basic understanding of numerous fields and issues "adjacent" ours, including primary health care (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201892121-126>) and another relevant medical issue, the impact of antibiotic use (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.20189140-52>), sustainable agriculture (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.20178187-94>) and other agricultural issues (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201893292-313> and <https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.20189289-108> and <https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201782207-231>), the use of economic analysis in nutrition research (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201910138-53>), issues related to botany and harmful substances in plants (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201893163-175>) and in the environment (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.20178195-108>), and even the impact of diet on psychological factors (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201893241-253>). While we have not yet directly explored anthropology, a field that has been critical for me in the more practical research I've been involved in over the years,

we have published research papers using qualitative methods (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201893254-260> and <https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201910118-37>).

We need to force the research agendas in areas important to our core issues to complexify in the sense of coming closer and closer to understanding real life issues in real life settings. Researchers can only achieve this when they have some understanding of the broader contexts, such as those mentioned above. In one of the fields I work in, micronutrient deficiency control programs, I have found that even researchers with the best intentions are surprised to learn that it is actually possible to conduct controlled clinical trials not just on quantified nutrient supplements, but on foods and even meals. There are randomized clinical trials examining the impact on iron status of consumption of a single food containing vitamin C (<https://doi.org/10.1080/07315724.2011.10719960>), the impact on vitamin A status of several plant foods individually (<https://doi.org/10.1093/jn/131.5.1497>), and even the impact on serum retinol of meals with measured amounts of carotene, revealing how carotene absorption is increased by deworming in advance (<https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.ejcn.1601108>).

Equally challenging is to move the research agenda for issues related to obesity and NCDs out of the lab and the clinic and into real life. The present issue contains an article by Anshu et al (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201910264-75>) requiring us to stretch into the biochemical arena. Our authors examine the potential impact of dietary manipulation on a gut hormone, GLP-1, which is responsible for about half of our insulin secretion in response to a meal. This may offer new ways of treating and even preventing type 2 diabetes and obesity. Theirs is only a first step. Like in the field of nutrient deficiencies, researchers in this area find the diet complex to work with directly, so often utilize specific formulas or formulated products used in the treatment of diabetes. I hope we can begin moving beyond that. Focusing also on a technical medical issue, Perceval and coauthors (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201910240-63>) review the complex literature on the treatment and prevention of gastrointestinal disorders using probiotics.

Speaking of ensuring that public health nutrition achieves and maintains a real-life perspective, the World Public Health Nutrition Association and its journal World Nutrition are unique in ensuring that nutrition science is not shorn of the political perspective. In this issue of WN, for example, Holla and Gupta (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201910276-86>) ask whether the health of the food industry or the consumer ought to receive priority. Kent (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.20191028-26>), in his Good Questions column, asks how milk banks should be regulated.

But while we have rightly focused on the impact of the process of industrialized take-over of our agriculture and food, we have perhaps not adequately realized the impact fundamentalist religion is having as it allies with the wealthy--and the corporations and the media they control--to degrade and eliminate the role of science in decision-making in governments, UN bodies, and other institutions around the world. This suspicion, often hatred, of science is easily amalgamated with the ongoing corporate frustration over the use of science to inhibit their generation of massive short-term profits in ways that put the health of human beings and the planet at risk.

This issue of WN includes an article by Marion Nestle (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201910287-91>) describing how the Trump Administration is attacking and destroying the more “problematic” sections of the Environmental Research Service, one of the best sources of agricultural and dietary data useful in our field and to nutrition advocates in general.

Myself and coauthors (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.201910227-39>) have a research paper in this issue that focuses on a scientific question that has been “politicized” in another way: how to advise women about alcohol consumption while breastfeeding. As for other “hot topics”, emotions tend to dampen scientific advance. Fearing that this will risk public criticism and even their careers, scientists simply tend to avoid asking certain questions. In a heated discussion of this issue on Twitter some years ago, I was called Hitler. This only inspired me to look further into it. This article in WN explores whether strongly or weakly worded messages are actually likely to have an impact on young women’s intent to breast feed and to drink alcohol while doing so. The short questionnaire we used is provided in hopes that others will do similar research in other settings.

In this issue, the President of WPHNA, Margaret Miller (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.20191024-7>), summarizes the alarming state of all types of malnutrition in the world, and the impact that our current food production methods can have in accelerating climate change. She then introduces the themes of our next congress, the current state of knowledge, policy and action in public health nutrition at the mid-point of the Decade of Nutrition. The Congress is scheduled to take place in Brisbane Australia on March 31-April 2, 2020.

WPHNA is launching a contest as a way of allocating three “scholarships” or subsidies to participants from low income countries. We will award them to the paper judged best that is submitted to WN from low-income countries in each region, Africa, Asia/Pacific, and Latin America. Papers must be submitted by November 30, 2019. The contest is described here (<https://www.wphna.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/paper%20writing%20contest.pdf>).

Readers may have noticed that above, instead of providing references, I provided DOI’s to papers I was referring to. This saves me and you a lot of trouble. WN began using them two years ago on every item published in the journal. This costs money, but offers additional value to our authors. Each DOI is unique, unchanging, and functions as a URL to the article. Click on it and you go directly to the article, without having to look it up on a search engine or on a journal’s website. This also ensures that WN articles are widely searchable on academic websites like Google Scholar and will remain permanently visible.

As we have written about before, avoidance of and even exposure of (<https://www.wphna.org/conflict-of-interest/>) conflicts of interest in our field is a major concern of WPHNA and WN. This must be done in a transparent way but at least I believe, avoid a fundamentalist approach which believes that any and all contact between public health nutritionists and industry is forbidden. Thus in our previous issue we carried two letters by a company manufacturing bacterial supplements for babies (<https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.2019101138-142> and <https://doi.org/10.26596/wn.2019101144-146>). In the present issue, Anshu and his two coauthors work for Abbott Laboratories International, though they claim this involves no conflict of interest regarding the paper we have published. I have added further explanation to the end of their paper for those who are interested and there I invite readers to contact me with further questions.

--Ted Greiner, Editor-in-Chief