

WN Feedback

World Nutrition Volume 5, Number 4, April 2014

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association
Published monthly at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/

Big Food. Transitions in South-East Asia and China **Fast food impact in the East**

[Access April Update Claudio Schuftan on McDonald's in Vietnam here](#)

[Access April Update on obesity in China here](#)

[Access this issue Big Food Watch on Nestlé's BenNaNa in China here](#)



McDonald's and other foreign fast food chains have had an impact in South-East Asia and China, while plenty of local street and snack food is unhealthy. World Bank neglect also has had an impact

Barry Popkin writes:

From my experience over many years now, observing nutritional and epidemiological shifts in China and Asia, here are a couple of comments on the *Update* pieces in the April *WN*, one by Claudio Schuftan on McDonald's opening in Vietnam (1), the other on the rise of fast food and obesity in China (2).

Away-from-home eating has significantly increased in much of South-East Asia, including Vietnam and China, since the 1990s. Even so, only a small proportion of this comes from modern western fast food chains. But a classic study done nearly 20 years ago by a group of anthropologists has shown that outlets of chains such as McDonalds have had a profound impact on the entire restaurant sector and the culture of eating in these countries (3).

In South-East Asia, it is cheaper to eat out than to cook at home. Much comes from little stalls spread across the cities such as Ho Chi Minh and Bangkok, or congregated in hawker centres in Singapore. Much of this is local and existed before McDonald's ever reached the shores of these countries. It is not healthy eating. It is laden with saturated fat and sodium and very often deep-fried food.

That said, away-from-home eating needs to be kept separate from the larger forces changing the diets of Asia, in particular large-scale convenience stores and supermarket chains, and packaged food generally. This is not all foreign companies. There are plenty of Asian chain enterprises and branded foods and drinks. For instance, *ramen* noodles, a major source of saturated fat and sodium, is a regional food that is very unhealthy, convenient, and enormously popular in the region. Yes, Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola, and other sugared soft drinks made by these corporations, have a lot to do with the sweetening of Asian diets, and also there are many local clones that are equally popular and much cheaper.

World Bank neglect

Now for the World Bank report on China (2,4). The report hits at issues relevant to China and all of South-East Asia. But it ignores the role of the World Bank itself, in developing cheap animal source foods, in distorting agriculture systems, and in shifting the relative price structure through huge subsidies and assistance in designing agriculture policies away from legumes, coarse grains, fruits and vegetables, toward oils, animal source foods and many refined products.

Also the report does not mention the World Bank's own many decades of neglect of obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases in its programmes and policies, across all low- and middle-income regions and countries. The authors only need to look at accounts from Brazil and China from earlier decades (5,6) to see they are just repeating these documents and not actively getting involved in creating solutions.

Yet it is never too late. Perhaps this report is a sign that the World Bank finally is now no longer denying that obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases are dominant threats to the well-being of low- and middle-income countries, and that the Bank needs to get actively involved in generating large-scale regulatory and economic policy development. Such a shift would be very important if it occurred, and was done with wisdom and use of existing knowledge. The recent Bellagio conference on this topic provides ample examples where the power of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund could have been, and even now could be, counterfoils to Big Food (7).

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Popkin B. *Big Food. Transitions in South-East Asia and China. Fast food impact in the East [Feedback]*. *World Nutrition* May 2014, **5**, 5, 486-488

International Conferences on Nutrition A joint responsibility

[Access 1992 FAO-WHO ICN Final report here](#)

[Access 1992 FAO-WHO ICN Declaration and Plan of Action here](#)

[Access April 2014 Geoffrey Cannon on NUGAG here](#)

Claudio Schuftan writes:

Your account [in the April issue of *WN*](#) of the 'sugar wars' of the 1990s and 2000s, involving United Nations agencies, was illuminating. It seems that nothing changes. We can only hope that this time UN officials have more courage, and that the most powerful UN member States at last accept that added sugars and syrups, most of all in ultra-processed products including soft drinks, must be limited and regulated.

This note is simply to point out that the first International Conference on Nutrition of 1992 was not the responsibility of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, but of FAO jointly with the World Health Organization. The same applies to the forthcoming 'ICN2' to be held this coming November. Although the venue is at FAO in Rome, the conference itself is a joint responsibility.

Claudio Schuftan

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Schuftan C. International Conference on Nutrition. A joint responsibility [Feedback]. *World Nutrition* May 2014, **5**, 5, 488

Geoffrey Cannon replies

Claudio Schuftan is of course correct. The 1992 ICN, and also the forthcoming 2014 ICN, were and are joint responsibilities, and other UN agencies are involved also. The issue is substantive, because part of the purpose of the conference is to produce a final statement that addresses all types of nutrition-related disease, in the context of social, economic, political and environmental drivers of states of health. [The 1992 Final Report](#) and also its final [Declaration and Plan of Action](#) are worth reading now. The preamble of the Declaration states:

Hunger and malnutrition are unacceptable in a world that has both the knowledge and the resources to end this human catastrophe. Access to nutritionally adequate and safe food is a right of each individual. We recognize that globally there is enough food for all and that inequitable access is the main problem. Bearing in mind the right to an adequate standard of living, including food, contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we pledge to act in solidarity to ensure that freedom from hunger becomes a reality. We also declare our firm commitment to work together to ensure sustained nutritional well-being for all people in a peaceful, just and environmentally safe world.

Schuftan C, Cannon G. International Conferences on Nutrition. A joint responsibility [Feedback]. World Nutrition May 2014, 5, 5, 488-489

2015-2015. Sustainable development **We must risk our cows**

[Access April 2014 David Werner on Health for All here](#)

[Access this issue Maria Hamlin Zuniga, Claudio Schuftan on Health for All here](#)



Agricultural development may – or may not – be sustainable. Scenes above are from the Brazilian State of Goiás. Cattle, and soy grown to feed cattle, are displacing forests and cerrado (savannah)

From Thiago Héric de Sá:

In Goiás, my home State in the interior of Brazil, where cattle are part of the local culture and vital to the economy, there is a traditional saying: ‘I would give a cow not to get involved in a discussion, but I would give cattle (many cows) not to give up in a discussion’.

One of the major current worldwide debates in public health, including nutrition, is the UN-led strategic direction for the years 2015-2025 and the new Sustainable Development Goals (1), following the 2000-2015 strategy now completing its term, with the Millennium Development Goals.

I'd like to propose that *WN* gets more engaged in this discussion. In the last year *WN* has carried commentaries and contributions that engage with the issue of when and how development can be sustainable (2,3), and Philip James's 'As I see it' column has highlighted the *Lancet* series on chronic non-communicable diseases, referring to the 2015-2025 challenge (4). But *WN* has not yet as far as I know, explicitly discussed the Sustainable Development Goals.

The pictures above both show scenes in Goiás. Both illustrate why issues of development and sustainability are crucial. On the left are cattle, on which the economy of the State depends. On the right are vast fields of soy grown to feed cattle in Brazil and other countries, also vital for Brazil's agricultural economy. But, as indicated in the right picture, in Goiás and other States soy is displacing the remaining natural *cerrado* (savannah), which is Brazil's richest natural ecosystem. North of Goiás in Amazonia, vast tracts of the rainforest are still being cut down to make room for cattle and soy on soil that is fragile. So we in Brazil, and I suggest colleagues in China, Canada, Australia, Russia and other vast countries, and of course in smaller counties too, need to learn how development can be sustainable.

There is still time, I suggest, to influence Sustainable Development targets and indicators, such as those that concern food security and nutrition, gender inequality and women's empowerment, global governance – and an area that especially interests me, sustainable transport. There are some discussions we need to engage in and stay in, even if this means risking many cows!

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Sá TH. 2015-2025. Sustainable development. We must risk our cows [Feedback]. World Nutrition May 2014, 5, 5, 489-491

Editor's response. Thiago Herick de Sá is right. The issue of sustainable development is crucial to production and consumption and to the future of the world – hence the UN initiative. Two commentaries, [in the previous WN](#) and in [this issue](#), look forward to the revival of the Health for All philosophy. This advocates a type of development which, rooted in communities, should remain sustainable. Many commentators feel that the concept of 'development' needs to be re-examined in order to make development sustainable. Any definition that equates or associates 'development' with continuing or increasing overuse and abuse of natural resources is obviously not sustainable. The examples given in the letter, of destruction of the rain-forest and the cerrado in Brazil to raise and feed cattle, is one of unsustainable development. But let a thousand cows roam! Readers are invited to make suggestions for more WN contributions. Proposals to wn.theeditor@gmail.com

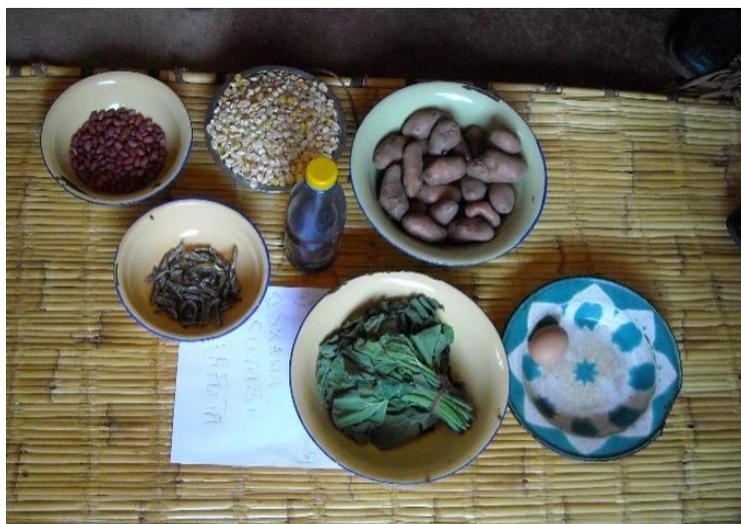
Kwashiorkor. Malnutrition

What children who are recovering need

[Access WHO Bulletin 2003 Michael Krawinkel on kwashiorkor here](#)

[Access March 2014 Editorial on the meaning of 'kwashiorkor' here](#)

[Access March 2014 Inspiration on Cicely Williams here](#)



Ingredients of an improved porridge for young infants in rural Malawi. Besides improving survival of the severely malnourished, it is a challenge to enable families to feed the child a more nutritious diet

From Michael B. Krawinkel

It is good that recent publications on kwashiorkor, its immediate and underlying causes, and its precipitating factors (1), create awareness for this condition. It remains a cause of death for many children in the world.

Besides the greater awareness for kwashiorkor, two additional aspects need our attention, in my perception. These are its management within the frame of community-based programmes, and the transition from any kind of therapeutic diets to the family's diets.

Regarding the community-based management of severe malnutrition, many reports tell us about the great success of this approach using ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) in general. But examination of details about the condition of the children enrolled in RUTF distribution programmes show that the term 'kwashiorkor' is used for children who are obviously not so severely affected. This need not reduce the success of the programmes, but it raises the question of what happens – and should happen – to those children who need clinical care, at least for the first week of treatment. As has been suggested, this clinical care needs to be critically revised and adjusted to regional and local circumstances (2,3).

Independently from the use of RUTF or other therapeutic formula such as F100 or F125, the challenge for the families is to feed a diet to the children who are recovered from kwashiorkor, which provides all nutrients and sufficient energy in sufficient concentration. This challenge is seldom addressed in reports about the success of kwashiorkor management.

It is essential, in my judgement, to look beyond the biomedical aspects of the condition and to assess local opportunities and resources for such diets. Sometimes nutrient supplements and fortified foods may be needed. But at other times, local agro-biodiversity can provide all the needed nutrients, in which case the challenge is rather the optimal combination of different local appropriate foods – as illustrated in the picture above.

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Krawinkel M. Kwashiorkor. Malnutrition. What children who are recovering need. [Feedback]. World Nutrition May 2014, 5, 5, 491-492

Primary health care. Breastfeeding
Celebrating Cicely Williams

[Access March 2014 Editorial on the meaning of 'kwashiorkor' here](#)

[Access March 2014 Inspiration on Cicely Williams here](#)

From Patti Rundall:



Thank you for the piece about Cicely Williams (above). She was a truly important and inspiring figure who never minced her words. Thanks too for reminding your readers of the importance of Cicely's lesson about breastfeeding in child survival – 20 babies born, 20 babies survived, and not a processed fortified food in sight! For more about how her work continues, see www.ibfan.org, and also [Baby Milk Action Update 46](#).

Patti Rundall

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Reference

- 1 Cannon G. Cicely Williams. Public health and child nutrition hero [*Inspiration*] *World Nutrition* March 2014, 5, 3, 262-267

Gabrielle Palmer adds: Cicely Williams' fierceness and pragmatism inspired me to study nutrition. I recall her saying that the diet in the Japanese internment camp was inadequate, but because she advised the women to eat leaves (maybe from amaranth, bean or cassava) they were protected from severe deficiencies of vitamins and minerals. Diseases such as *beri beri* (thiamin deficiency) were then widespread and killed thousands fed on meagre milled white rice diets in prisoner-of-war and internment camps. It was Cicely who taught me the importance of breastfeeding in adverse conditions: 'Twenty babies born, twenty babies breastfed, and they all grew up healthy', she said firmly about the children born to British mothers in the camp. She understood, from her observation and experience, the robustness of lactation, long before research proved it.

Rundall P, Palmer G. *Primary health care. Breastfeeding. Celebrating Cicely Williams* [*Feedback*]. *World Nutrition* May 2014, 5, 5, 493

Mediterranean diet

A whole world of good food

[Access April 2014 Jane Kramer on Claudia Roden here](#)



The annual festival of history La Storia in Piazza held at the Palazzo Ducale in Genoa, Italy, celebrated food this April. Claudia Roden was there, speaking on varieties of Mediterranean diets

Claudia Roden writes:

Many thanks for the [Inspiration on my work](#). A new updated and much enlarged illustrated 25th anniversary edition of *The Food of Italy - Region by Region* (1) has come out, and I have been speaking about it at book weeks and literary and gastronomic festivals.

Between 10 and 13 April I was in Genoa at *La Storia in Piazza*, an annual history festival held at the *Palazzo Ducale*. This year the theme was food, [and I spoke about the Mediterranean diet](#), about which there some misconceptions. The traditional diets of the whole Mediterranean littoral, including the Levant and North Africa (I am originally Egyptian) are more varied than is commonly supposed. For example, the staple cereals in much of the whole Mediterranean region are rice or wheat – and Africans do not use olive oil! The event in Genoa was free. It included classical and jazz concerts, a market for artisan producers in the piazza, and amazingly for such a serious subject as history, audiences of up to 28,000 people inside and outside the *Palazzo*.

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Roden C. *Mediterranean diet. A whole world of good food* [Feedback]. *World Nutrition* May 2014, **5**, 5, 494

FAO-WHO International Conference on Nutrition

Needed: Partnership with civil society

Editor's note

WN here prints the open letter sent by and on behalf of civil society and public interest organisations and social movements, to the organisers of the second [International Conference on Nutrition](#). Like the first such conference in 1992, ICN2 is organised jointly by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Health Organization, and is being held on 19-21 November this year. FAO and WHO have pledged a fully participatory process, together with other UN and international organisations involved, including the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN World Food Programme, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization.

So far, civil society organisations that work in the public interest feel that they are not adequately represented in the ICN2 process. Here they explain why, and outline some of the themes and issues that need to be taken into account now, in further preparations, and at the ICN and its outcomes. The heading of their letter, which follows, is 'Ensuring a collaborative and meaningful outcome for the second International Conference on Nutrition'.

We would like to acknowledge the efforts of the organisers of the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) in organising the event so far. Being held 22 years after the first one, ICN2 comes at a moment when, for the first time, some problems of under-nutrition are obtaining attention and promises of funding.

However, hunger and under-nutrition rates remain unacceptably high. Awareness is also growing of the double burden of malnutrition, problems of overweight and non-communicable diseases, the link between them, and the need to address both at the same time by focusing on their socio-economic and environmental determinants. The need for a greater concern for nutrition within the context of the current discussions regarding food and mode of production at the base of food systems is also being recognised.

Nutrition is a powerful equaliser. Addressing malnutrition in all its forms will save lives, reduce inequalities, and build strong and resilient individuals, families, communities, and populations.

The ICN2 provides an opportunity to adopt the needed rights-based coordination of all nutrition issues by among other things adopting a truly participatory process that effectively includes active civil society and social movement involvement, in close coordination with the UN Committee on World Food Security.

According to its website, ICN2 seeks to propose a flexible policy framework to address today's major nutrition challenges. It also aims to identify priorities for enhanced international cooperation on nutrition. Sustainably addressing malnutrition

in all its forms will require a collective and concerted effort on behalf of all rights holders and duty bearers. ICN2 gives an opportunity for all parties to gather and share their respective rich experiences and lessons learned, thus contributing to a strong and comprehensive political document that calls for the needed collective strategies to be applied at the local level.

Civil society and social movements assert that it is necessary to identify and address violations of the right to adequate food and nutrition that systematically result in hunger, malnutrition and related diseases, affecting in particular small-scale food producers, marginalised urban and rural workers, indigenous peoples, social groups suffering from discrimination, children and the unemployed. In all of these groups and in general women are more affected.

The organisations of these affected groups, along with programmes of other civil society organisations, already reach deeply inside communities of high burden countries, and are critical to achieve the World Health Assembly's nutrition targets and nutrition-related chronic non-communicable disease targets. Areas of work and experience range from nutrition, health, agriculture, fisheries and food security issues at all levels, from the grassroots to national policy and global arenas, encompassing both programme and political aspects.

States are called upon to implement policies that respect, protect and fulfil equal access of individuals, groups and peoples, to basic resources (such as land, water, seeds, biodiversity, credit); jobs and decent living wages; essential public services (water, sanitation, education, quality healthcare); social protection and social security. States are further called upon to introduce strong human rights-based regulations on the activities of corporations in their territories, as well as in other countries, which negatively impact food and nutritional security, in line with the Maastricht *Principles on Extraterritorial Obligations*.

The causes of malnutrition in all its forms are complex and multidimensional. ICN2 has the opportunity to highlight the importance of nutrition across the relevant sectors, including health, education, agriculture and food production, trade, and social protection. ICN2 can also establish a more effective bridging across nutrition-sensitive and nutrition-specific interventions, and highlight the foundational nature of food and nutrition security to human rights and social equality.

We believe that working closely with civil society will ensure the realisation of the potential of ICN2.

Recommendations

We present the following recommendations. The ICN2 and member states should: Commit to an open and transparent process during the preparation for the event, throughout the event itself, and in any planned follow-up. To date, there has been inadequate dialogue between organisers and civil society in particular. This should be

rectified as a matter of urgency, with civil society participation, with an emphasis on organisations of people that are most affected by malnutrition, prioritised for discussion in the next Joint Working Group meeting.

Work towards a political document that is explicitly and firmly grounded on human rights. The right to food is a basic human right that has been internationally recognised since 1948. A human-rights driven approach can effectively and sustainably tackle inequalities in food and nutrition security, targeting the most affected people and improving accountability and participation in decision making.

Recognise that people are at the heart of food systems and that the majority of the world's poor are also small scale food producers. There is a need to focus on small scale food producers, women, indigenous and other vulnerable people and the role that they play in producing food for all.

Re-orient their policies and decisively support sustainable, biodiverse, climate-resilient agriculture and food systems that integrate gender, participatory and nutritional dimensions.

Enable food diversity through food support schemes and public policies, since dietary diversity is at the heart of better nutrition.

Fully respect, protect and fulfil women's rights and design and revise laws to ensure that women are accorded full and equal land rights, as well as take other necessary measures to give women access to credit, capital, appropriate technologies, markets, and information. The unique and multiple roles of women as the main producers, and preparers of food, as well as carers must be recognised if efforts to improve nutrition are to be successful. Gender discrimination is one of the fundamental drivers of malnutrition. Actions to end hunger and malnutrition in all forms must work to transform societal norms that result in violations of reproductive rights, girls eating last and least, keeping girls out of school, limiting women's incomes, voices and productivity, and leading to child marriage.

Commit to the protection for the best interest of the child and ensure the implementation of WHO *Recommendations on the Marketing of Foods and Non-Alcoholic Beverages to Children*, highlighting the importance of the comment emitted by the Convention on the Rights of the Child from the Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No. 16 (2013) on *State Obligations Regarding the Impact of the Business Sector on Children's Rights*.

Be specific. For political commitments to translate into action, they must be specific and time-bound from short- to long-term commitments. Food and nutrition security needs to be measured with indicators and targets that ensure action and accountability toward access to adequate nutritious food. ICN2 and member States

should adopt more specific and accountable commitments in a plan of action for nutrition, based on a broad consultation with all actors, including civil society. Put in place effective mechanisms for multi-actor and multi-sector monitoring from the country to the global level within the context of the UN Committee on World Food Security monitoring activity.

Maintain consideration of factors beyond the food system perspective, and propose specific commitments recognising other pathways that affect nutrition, including health services, a healthy environment, caring practices. Doing anything less, places the ICN2 at risk of being perceived as a lost opportunity.

Regulate through legally binding instruments food corporations producing and marketing breastmilk substitutes, ultra-processed food and drink products that promote and foster overweight, inadequate diets and chronic non-communicable diseases.

Recognise that breastfeeding is the most cost-effective nutrition intervention to address child malnutrition. Currently breastfeeding faces many barriers such as the lack of implementation of the *Global Strategy on Infant and Young Child Feeding* and the ongoing breaches of the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes and subsequent WHA resolutions. States are called upon to ensure the implementation of both, positioning breastfeeding as a norm, respected and promoted at community level. Food sovereignty approaches to complementary feeding and addressing the unwelcomed incursion of medicalised, processed, and globalised ready-to-use commercial foods in young child feeding are also as much priorities as the protection of children's and their mothers' rights to adequate food and nutrition. Justiciable maternity entitlements must be instituted by all States to support the rights of working mothers.

Adopt the life-cycle approach to tackle malnutrition, recognising the importance of the first 1000 days in preventing malnutrition in all its forms.

The UN System should reconvene the Standing Committee on Nutrition or develop a new mechanism that can provide international normative guidance to all sectors regarding nutrition. This mechanism should involve all development partners, both governmental and non-governmental and should have explicit, clear and effective relations with the UN Committee on World Food Security.

States must also guard their food policy development and implementation from conflicts of interest resulting from undue influence leveraged by corporations and/or 'private-public-partnerships', including in the UN and especially in WHO.

Donors should start phasing out the use of product-based approaches for the prevention of malnutrition, and move to human rights-based, locally owned, bottom-

up approaches, and restrict the use of product-based approaches to the treatment of acute malnutrition.

Stineke Oenema

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On behalf of

Action Contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger) International
Alliance 2015; Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee
Bread for the World; *Centro Internazionale Crocevia*
Civil Society Alliance for Scaling up Nutrition, Bangladesh
Concern Worldwide; Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance
El Poder del Consumidor; FIAN International, FIAN Nepal
Gene Campaign, India; Habitat International Coalition
ICCO Cooperation; NESC (*Instituto de estudos socioeconômicos*)
International Baby Food Action Network
Observatory of Food and Nutrition Policies, University of Brasilia
People's Health Movement; Right to Food Campaign, India
Save the Children Guatemala; Terra Nuova; *Welthungerhilfe*
World Public Health Nutrition Association; World Vision International

Oenema S, on behalf of civil society. FAO-WHO International Conference on Nutrition.

Needed: Partnership with civil society. [Feedback]. World Nutrition May 2014, 5, 5, 495-499

How to respond

Feedback is edited by Isabela Sattamini. Please address letters for publication to wn.letters@gmail.com. Letters usually respond to or comment on contributions to *World Nutrition*. More general letters will also be considered. Usual length for main text of letters is between 350 and 1,000 words but they can be shorter or longer. Any references should usually be limited to up to 12. Letters are edited for length and style, may be shortened or developed, and once edited are sent to the author for approval.