

The illustrious career of John Mason

We are very sad to learn of the passing away of John Beverly Mason. He died on the 28th of August 2018, at the age of 74, after bravely battling cancer for years. His wife and children were with him at the end at their home in Killington, Vermont, USA.

Born in Welwyn, England in 1944, John pioneered an incredible career over the last five decades, becoming a nutritionist of global renown. After going to school at Marlborough College, he went to University at Magdalene College in Cambridge in 1962 where he gained his BA and MA, before getting his PhD in nutritional biochemistry from the University of Cambridge in 1969.

He then went to do research on child health and nutrition in Africa with the Medical Research Council, Dunn Nutritional Unit, working in both East and West Africa. In 1975 he joined the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome, where he worked initially on Nutritional Surveillance, and then on Nutrition Policy and Planning. In 1980 John joined Cornell University in upstate New York as the Director of the Cornell Nutritional Surveillance Program. There he conducted research and training both in Cornell and overseas, as well as co-directing a joint program with UNICEF to promote nutrition in Eastern and Southern Africa.

Returning to the United Nations in 1986, John became Technical Secretary of the United Nations (UN) coordinating committee on nutrition (ACC/SCN), initially based in FAO Rome, but then moving to the World Health Organization in Geneva. Reporting to the ACC/SCN Chairman, John directed the secretariat of the inter-agency group with 17 UN member agencies, developed liaison with bilateral donor agencies and associated NGO's, as well as collaboration with an Advisory Group of Experts on Nutrition. John initiated, researched and published SCN's World Nutrition Reports from 1987-2007, as well as the Refugee Nutrition Information System reports each trimester. Twelve substantial policy monographs on current issues in international nutrition were also produced in the period 1990-1996. Examples of these were: 'How Nutrition Improves', 'Nutrition-relevant Actions', 'Managing Successful Nutrition Programmes'.

In 1996, John joined Tulane University where, for over two decades, he taught various advanced courses on Public Nutrition at the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, with many students benefiting from his classes and his orientation of their research. During John's time at Tulane, he continued to work actively in assisting agencies and country governments in developing nutrition programmes, and especially in establishing nutrition surveillance systems. Together with Ethiopian colleagues he documented improvements in child nutritional status and offered plausible explanations of this important change. In January of this year he retired from Tulane as an Emeritus Professor.

Across the five decades of his illustrious career, he published many hundreds of book chapters and scientific articles, mostly focused on: nutrition policy development; approaches to sustaining community-based programs for nutrition improvement; and on micronutrient deficiencies in terms of epidemiology and prevention. Over the last few years John led critical analytic work questioning the current efficacy of national Vitamin A supplementation programmes. John's epidemiological skills were applied to a systematic review of the large-scale trials of Vitamin A, demonstrating that the earlier-reported impact has been very significantly attenuated and that such programmes may now be doing more harm than good in many situations.

As well as being a gifted researcher and teacher, John was an exceptional mentor to many young nutritionists and public health practitioners, inspiring several to rise to prominence in international nutrition and health work. John was a charming and humorous colleague and friend. He will be sorely missed.

--Roger Shrimpton and David Sanders