

## WN Editorial

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### Public health and nutrition

## Holding fast to that which is good

This is a momentous time for us all who work for *World Nutrition*, four and a half years after our launch. Here follow four reasons why.

### *The vitamin A story*

The first ever issue of *WN* in May 2010 was [a cover](#), contents, a manifesto, [one commentary](#), and [a related editorial](#). This was the result of Michael Latham, professor of international nutrition at Cornell University, New York, US, sending us a long paper, responding to our commitment to publish a journal of ideas and debate on topics of importance. He challenged established global policies and programmes in which massive financial, material and professional investments have been made.

Michael Latham, who died in 2011, remains renowned as a physician specialising in nutrition with vast experience in East Africa; and as a mentor of students some now leaders in the field, a champion of breastfeeding, and a principled professional serving the public good. The title of his *WN* inaugural commentary was – is – ‘The great vitamin A fiasco’. It opposes the global policy and practice, current then and now, of universal supplementation with massive doses of vitamin A, of whole populations of children thought to be at risk of deficiency. He concludes:

Since its beginning, I have been a player in and an observer of the process by which prevention of vitamin A deficiency has been transformed into a universal indiscriminate programme using medicinal doses of vitamin A capsules, claimed to be saving the lives of millions of young children. Over the years, with many colleagues in Asia, Africa and elsewhere, I have become increasingly dismayed by the march of events.

Previously, I was centrally engaged in the politics of protein and the alleged pandemic of protein deficiency. This led to a gross over-reaction from United Nations agencies and their partners. This in turn led in the mid 1970s to a ‘paradigm shift’: a sudden collapse of confidence in the global ‘protein gap’ hypothesis, discrediting food and nutrition policy-makers at the highest level. History is about to repeat itself, for much the same reasons.

Many letters [especially from Asia](#), and the [UN Food and Agriculture Organization](#), supported Michael Latham. Distinguished practitioners of the universal supplement programme defended current policies and programmes, [in a later WN commentary](#). A debate was held at the international conference on public health nutrition later in 2010 in Porto, Portugal, and votes counted. Before the debate the voting was even. After the debate, the vote was strongly in favour of Michael Latham's position.

History may indeed now be repeating itself. This October the *International Journal of Epidemiology* has published '[Vitamin A policies need rethinking](#)', a long paper by five researchers that updates and in effect vindicates Michael Latham's position. It has already been read with intense interest all over the world. Its five authors include John Mason and Roger Shrimpton, two former general secretaries of the UN System Standing Committee on Nutrition (SCN) one of whom is a former UNICEF chief of nutrition; Ted Greiner, former convenor of the UN SCN bilateral and then civil society sections; and David Sanders of the University of the Western Cape, South Africa. After review and analysis of the evidence, they conclude:

A policy shift is needed... A prudent phase-over is needed towards increasing regular intakes of vitamin A at physiological levels, daily or weekly, replacing the high-dose periodic high-dose capsule distribution programmes. Moving resources in this direction must happen sooner or later. It should be sooner.

The authors also confirm, as did Michael Latham, and as did the final outcome document of the 1992 UN International Conference on Nutrition, that the rational and appropriate sustained general policy for populations identified as vulnerable, is food-based. This means breastfeeding, and foods that are good sources of vitamin A precursors, notably fruits that are abundant in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

The authors of the new paper give an account of their findings as the cover feature of this issue of *WN*. It is time to repeat that all governments of countries where vitamin A shortage and deficiency is endemic need to pledge public funds and resources to policies and programmes based on local foods. It is also time to repeat that all relevant international agencies and actors need to reaffirm this policy, support such actions and programmes, and do nothing that impedes or distracts from them.

### ***Multi-dimensional science***

Our second matter of moment is a commentary in this issue of *WN* of which Claus Leitzmann is co-author. This carries the flag raised by a whole special issue of *Public Health Nutrition* in 2005. As also later developed, this defines nutrition as a social, economic and environmental as well as a biological and behavioural discipline. Claus Leitzmann convened the workshop at Giessen at which this concept, now commonly adopted including within the UN system, was agreed. [In WN this month the series of principles](#) also agreed at the workshop are set out. These are needed now more than ever to guide world policies and actions, such as those now being finally prepared for the International Conference on Nutrition, and later meetings. So, as examples:

- We are moving out of the era in which human activity has been mainly concerned with exploitation, production, and consumption, into a new era in which the main human concerns are of preservation, conservation and sustenance.
- Nutrition science should follow ethical, evolutionary, and ecological principles, respect history, culture and tradition, affirm human rights, and be committed to preserve and protect the human, living and physical worlds, all together.
- The responsibility of nutrition science now is to be concerned with the human world (personal, community and population health) and also with the whole living and natural world (planetary health).

### ***Big picture thinking***

Our third reason is connected. Tony McMichael was a leader at the Giessen workshop, in which three presidents of the International Union of Nutritional Sciences, Mark Wahlqvist, Ricardo Uauy and Ibrahim Elmadfa, participated, as did Tim Lang, Colin Tudge, the then editor of PHN Barrie Margetts, and others including *WN* editor Geoffrey Cannon. Tony called such work 'big picture thinking'.

In this issue of *WN* we carry tributes to Tony, who died in September, from 14 admirers. Tony's main single concern came to be climate, which *WN* was slow to admit as an increasingly powerful determinant of food systems and world health. But thanks to Tony and his colleague Colin Butler, and to Naomi Klein, we have caught up. Elihu Richter writes from the Centre for Genocide Prevention in Jerusalem:

Tony taught and showed me that epidemiology must move away from linear unidirectional models, to scenarios that are complex and circular. Our environments impact on us and we impact on these environments. A lot may be determined, but there is choice. I once explained this concept to a group of rabbis, and they got the message. They appreciated the Biblical precept that the Earth has not been given over to the absolute ownership of humans to use and abuse as they wish. Rather, we all should act as custodians, to maintain and preserve the Planet for the benefit of our contemporaries and for future generations.

Tony's colleagues Jane Dixon and Colin Sindall write from Australia:

It was early August and Tony was about to travel to Anchorage to be the keynote speaker at the World Congress on Epidemiology. He said rather wearily that he was not looking forward to the reception he might get, for he was going to challenge the discipline to rethink its orthodoxies and approaches. He had been inspired by reading Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, and was struck by parallels between the current state of epidemiology and economics. Piketty states that economics has lost its way because it ignores its basis in political economy. Tony's message is that epidemiology is doomed to irrelevance unless it returns to its mid-19th century origins when the observers of trends put great effort into attempting to determine their social causes, and were equally engaged in the environmental and social reform movements of their day.

*WN* will continue to explore the territory of the maps drawn by Tony McMichael. He will continue to remind us to discern big pictures.

### ***Policies fit for this century***

This is a momentous month for *WN* also because of the UN International Conference on Nutrition, convened in Rome between 19-22 November, which is meant to set out global policies and programmes until around 2030. The conference is in crisis. Public interest organisations and social movements, faced with drafts of conference outcome drafts that have been neutered in response to pressure from powerful member states, warn as follows:

The ICN2 negotiations failed to recognise that the current hegemonic food system and agro-industrial production model are not only unable to respond to the existing malnutrition problems, but have contributed to the creation of different forms of malnutrition and the decrease of the diversity and quality of diets. Unfair trade agreements, lack of investment in small-scale food production and support to agro-business models, have led to displacement of small-scale producers all over the world. Marketing of ultra-processed products, high in energy, sugar and salt, has contributed to the surge of obesity...

At the same time, unethical practices by breastmilk substitute producers continue to undermine the life-saving practice of breastfeeding. [There is also failure] to recognise gender inequality and women's rights violations (child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, violence against women, *inter alia*) as root causes of women and child malnutrition. How can we expect a political declaration based on such a flawed diagnosis to serve as the basis for an effective and coherent framework for action?

Commenting for this *WN* editorial. Tim Lang, professor of food policy at London's City University, warns:

The chasm between evidence for change and the policy processes is vast. There was a moment in the late 2000s when the rich developed nations suddenly felt under threat in their own food systems – when the banks wobbled and commodity prices rocketed. Some awareness that food governance was inappropriate followed. Now business-as-usual thinking has been reasserted. This is folly, for environment, health, and social justice, and also is a dangerous context for commerce. When the western banks failed, global debt was around 180 per cent of global GDP. It is now 212 per cent. This is a bubble that will burst.

The United Nations system was created to enable the nations of the world to assemble and reason together, to promote peace, justice and human rights, and to avert a third world war. The state of the world now falls far short of what the founders of the UN envisioned. But the United Nations and its constituent agencies still embody hope, intention and purpose. Many thousands of public servants in the UN are trying to do their best in increasingly frustrated and constrained circumstances. Everybody concerned with public health and public goods must surely remain committed to the principles and vision of the UN. It is the duty of all professionals and citizens engaged with public health and public goods, to hold to account the UN, its agencies – and its member states. Good people need and want informed candid friends, and constant inspired encouragement. We at *WN* will do what we can to continue in this duty.

***The editors***