

An Appreciation of the contributions by Alan Berg to Global Nutrition

Like many UK trained medical doctors working in Africa, I was completely unprepared for the severity and scale of malnutrition in the wards and communities when I worked to help develop a new medical school (Ahmadu Bello University) in northern Nigeria in the 70's. I did not have to look far to recognise that the underlying determinants were usually the combination of the influence of poverty/culture/education/violence and environment combined with high levels of infection. I was, subsequent to my initial clinical and public health work, profoundly fortunate to receive nutrition research training at the LSHTM, following which I worked in the Medical Research Council units in Malumfashi, northern Nigeria and the Gambia. Along with research groups in other countries it was possible to develop evidence-based, regimes for the prevention and management of malnutrition, leading to reduced child mortality and improved nutrition. These included better control of infection in severely malnourished young children and control of parasitic disease in school children. They also included the inclusion of Vitamin A supplements within community healthcare programmes, zinc supplements within oral rehydration and iodine supplements added to salt – so important in pregnancy for the prevention of impaired IQ.

All of the improved management protocols gave significant advantage to millions of children in disadvantaged families over the years by changing medical practice within clinical and community healthcare. There were many good examples where national governments and international development agencies worked together. Despite these advances, many more millions of children remained stunted or anaemic or suffered impaired intellectual developmental, partly as a result of maternal malnutrition. In many situations, improvement was limited by the limited capacity of Ministries of Health to make a difference. It was frustrating to recognise that malnutrition resulted in the bigger picture of “stunted human development” and not to be able to influence policies by national government or development agencies. True, there were many well-funded programmes aiming to improve the scale of food production in resource poor countries, and many have been successful but few, if any, focused on the need to improve food security among the disadvantaged. There were other perspectives for reducing the prevalence and severity of malnutrition – proposing that malnutrition should be tackled, at a national level, by identifying “at risk” communities and targeting resources and economic development activities towards them. Such perspectives sometimes viewed “Health Related Nutrition Interventions” as a diversion from the key objective of “Equity Related Nutrition Interventions”. Discussions between the two “Nutrition Advocacy Groups” were often, but not always, respectful. I know because I worked as a researcher where rigorous debate occurred between colleagues with different perspectives!

This is where the contributions of Alan Berg have been so influential. He was key in persuading national politicians and ministers, large development agencies and financial institutions giving grants and technical assistance to resource poor countries that it was essential to develop Nutrition Policies which recognised that “Integrated National Nutrition Programmes” were essential. This also recognised the “Dual Burden of Malnutrition” in which millions globally are affected, limiting their individual potential.

I am not a historical analyst and, despite being privileged to speak with him on one occasion, I am not strongly knowledgeable on Alan's many contributions. However, having lived in or visited

resource poor countries for 15 years of my professional life, and having seen the various ways that childhood nutrition has improved in some, I am deeply appreciative of Alan's massive contributions. May I respectfully suggest that, through a written review or reports of a meeting on "Achievements in Integrated National Nutrition Programmes", could be a way of honouring Alan's massive contributions and, even more importantly, of enabling a renewed emphasis on tackling the challenge of "Global Malnutrition", which still persists stunting bodies and minds and, shamefully, killing many thousands of children each year?

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