



John Dobbing (Ed.)

A Balanced Diet?

With 29 Figures

Springer-Verlag
London Berlin Heidelberg New York
Paris Tokyo

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4471-1654-7 e-ISBN-13: 978-1-4471-1652-3
DOI: 10.1007/ 978-1-4471-1652-3

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A balanced diet?

1. Man. Health. Effects of diet

I. Dobbing, John, 1922–
613.2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A Balanced diet? / [edited by] John Dobbing.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p. Includes index.

1. Nutritionally induced diseases 2. Nutrition. I. Dobbing, John.
RC622.B35 1988 616.3'9—dc19

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1988

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2128/3830-543210

Preface

Most multi-author books are either “books of scientific meetings” or collections of essays written by people selected by the Editor and invited to write around a common subject. This one is of neither type. It is the eighth in a series of “Dobbing Workshops” which began as an experiment in 1980, designed to avoid some of the disadvantages of both.

By far the greatest disadvantage of most orthodox multi-author books is that, unlike the papers in normal scientific research journals, they are not subjected to the usual refereeing procedure known as “peer review”. They are too frequently a means of by which authors can perpetrate, unchallenged, the publication of their own personal views, idiosyncrasies and straight mistakes in archival form. This should never happen, and only rarely does so, in the standard research journals, in which the reader can at least be assured that someone, usually far more knowledgeable than he, has had the opportunity to criticise the manuscript. What he reads is to that limited extent not likely to be flagrant rubbish. Such a time-honoured system does not, of course, guarantee complete probity, but at least the literature is less cluttered than it otherwise would be by wrong, misleading or trivial material. Peer review is not, however, without its own problems, since the chosen peer, being usually an acknowledged expert, and therefore a pillar of the Establishment, may frown on genuine innovation, as well as the rubbish, thereby inhibiting progress. Nevertheless it is a better system than the unreviewed publication in which everyone is his own expert, and much can be done to avoid unfair judgement by appointing more than one peer to comment on a submitted paper – this being the usual procedure. Would that lay authors, including journalists, often espousing activist causes, were subject to a similar discipline! There would then be less dangerously misleading writing, and much less flatulence from an increasing number who presently pervert the cause of consumerism for their own gratification.

Our new system goes some way towards avoiding some of these difficulties by having all the contributors to the book extensively referee all of the chapters.

On this occasion the contributors were chosen by Professor Donald Naismith, an established nutritionist, who contributed the first chapter

and submitted like everyone else to the peer review system to be outlined.

Each author's paper was first sent to all the other authors, who were asked to write a critical commentary on it as though they were doing so for a scientific journal – a procedure with which, as practising scientists, they were all familiar. All the critical commentaries were then sent to all the authors. At this stage an author could react to criticism in one of three ways: he could modify his original manuscript to take account of the criticism; or he could write a reply, to be published alongside the commentary; or he could ignore the criticism altogether.

We then all met for three days as a committee, and worked through each chapter in turn and thrashed out persisting disagreements. Sometimes during our meetings new topics or new points on existing topics arose, and someone would be asked to write a new paragraph or so for publication in the commentary. The finished book therefore contains a series of chapters, extensively peer reviewed like few others, followed by a "scrapbook" of residual commentary. There was absolutely no intention to reach a consensus on any matter. Consensus at the frontiers of scientific thought and knowledge spells death to progress, and dullness in the form of a lowest common denominator.

The main way our system differed from the reviewing practices of the learned scientific journal was that the sole judge of what was ultimately published was the author himself. Both in the chapters and the commentary which follows them, the named author has been exclusively responsible for what appears; but each has had the advantage of knowing precisely what eight other experts thought of his contribution. All the contributors know the extent to which their original writings were modified in the light of such refining fire. You, as the reader, will not be able to detect this, but at least you will be reassured that the quality of what you read has been enhanced, without detracting from the author's own views and style.

Such an exercise costs money, though not a very great deal. For generously agreeing to provide this, we wish to express our gratitude to the Snack, Nut and Crisps Manufacturers' Association. Since it has regrettably become customary to be suspicious that the sponsor may in some way have manipulated the occasion to his own advantage, I can only say that I am not aware of this having happened in this case. Part of my own role as Editor and Chairman was to act as honest broker, and to intervene and protect, where necessary, the interests of the participants from the sponsor. I can only say that such was never necessary. Furthermore, for the activist or the sceptic, I would like to hear of any part of the book which directly favours SNACMA in betrayal of the scientific truth. I have not found one. To be sure, such sponsorship is rarely altruistic, since a sponsor gains by being known, as in this case, to be prepared to take an important public and scientific topic seriously. Far from begrudging them that, I am profoundly grateful.

I wish to thank Keith Nightingale of SNACMA for a quality of helpfulness and personal kindness and tolerance which is rare; and my wife, Dr. Jean Sands, for almost comparable tolerance, but above all for her expert scientific and secretarial help. Finally I owe much to all the contributors,

who have had to put up with my substantial importunities, especially in the run-up period.

Hayfield, January 1988

John Dobbing

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