

SESSION 1: NUTRITION EDUCATION AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

What is nutrition education and its purpose?

By JENNY SALMON, 8 *Cherrydale Road, Camberley, Surrey GU15 1SR*

The overall title of this workshop (Teaching Nutrition to the Public and the Professions) has a somewhat formal and academic ring. In Session 1 our speakers are looking at the role of the mass media (radio, television, the press and, perhaps, video). In many ways the people involved in these media (the planners, producers and presenters) would argue that their prime role is not that of teacher but of entertainer. It is this fundamental difference of emphasis that sometimes gives rise to the accusations by the more academic nutritionists of trivialization, sensationalism and frank misrepresentation of facts by the media.

However, nutritionists and dietitians have much to learn from the approach and techniques of the media which have become the norm and are what people have come to expect. They expect entertainment, any knowledge incidentally gained being regarded as a 'plus'. What is certain is that dull and boring programmes, talks or articles will not teach the public, no matter how many good solid facts they contain.

When it comes to misrepresentation, it is of little use to complain in meetings such as this one where we are talking to the converted. We need to influence the people who can do something to change the quality of information. They will not be persuaded overnight to change, and some will never abandon what they see as the fundamental principles of radio, television, and the newspaper. However, one has only to look at the quality of information in 'slimming' magazines to realize that they can be persuaded to get it right, and no-one could accuse these magazines of not being successful in the commercial sense.

Some fundamental questions need to be asked and answered before anyone can tackle the business of nutrition education. Whether or not they are answered during the course of the session, they need to be addressed by each one of us; and I suspect that there will be no definite answers because each of us has an individual point of view.

First of all, let us ask whom we are trying to teach. It cannot be everyone in the country because that would be much too big a task. It would be too big because audiences within the community are so different that information would need to be presented to all of them in a different way in order to be effective. Defining the audience as precisely as possible is the prerequisite of any communications effort. Most social change begins in the social class ABC₁ and filters through to the other classes so, although it may not be in most need, we may have to start with this group.

Second, let us consider what we are trying to achieve. Are we aiming to educate everyone to a standard which would enable them to pass an A-level examination in Food and Nutrition? This may be thought a ridiculous suggestion but, from the way in which some information is presented, would seem to be the objective. Are we not trying to tell people what a balanced diet is in order to help them make the right food choices? Do they really need detailed knowledge of individual nutrients?

Third, let us think about our teaching methods. It would appear that some of the more zealous campaigners are taking the view that people must be made to alter their dietary habits in order to live longer. Does anyone have the right to take this approach? Surely, in this country, the most anyone should try to do is to present information about food and health in a way that is easily understood thus ensuring that people are aware of the risks (or benefits) of various actions, leaving it to them to make their own choices. Otherwise, it could be argued that the savings to the social services resulting from delaying the onset of illnesses could be wiped out by the need to care for an ever-increasing number of very-old people.

Finally, are we not in danger of arguing about what is good for them to such an extent that people become inclined to ignore totally all the information about food and health? The picture of a healthy diet all too often remains one of misery and self-denial—of fat, sugar and salt needing to be eliminated. That is not what we intend telling people but very often it is what they hear. Could it be that more ill-health may result from guilt and worry about food than from the food itself?

Printed in Great Britain