

EDITORIAL

SOUTH AFRICAN FOOD-BASED DIETARY GUIDELINES

The massive global burden of diet-related diseases and the growing perception that nutrient-based dietary guidelines are not effective in promoting appropriate diets and healthy lifestyles have motivated a number of countries and regions to develop food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs). In this issue of the journal, the South African FBDGs are defined and motivated in technical support papers for nutrition scientists and professionals. A working group representing different stakeholders developed the guidelines over a period of 4 years. The process recommended by a joint FAO/WHO expert consultation was followed.

The guidelines can now be used as a consistent communication tool because they represent expert agreement on how diet-related public health problems should be addressed by dietary recommendations to consumers. But they can also be used as basis in the planning, implementation and evaluation of public health nutrition strategies. National adoption and use of these guidelines will show a political will to tackle nutrition-related health problems.

The South African Working Group should be commended for developing one set of guidelines aimed at optimal nutrition for all South Africans 5 years and older, and without special dietary needs. The technical support papers indicate how each guideline was formulated to address existing under- and overnutrition in different communities. They further emphasise that the guidelines were based on existing eating patterns and are commensurate with the various South African dietary cultures. Clearly the guidelines demonstrate the striving towards equity in diet and health, aiming to optimise nutritional status in both disadvantaged and affluent communities. The nutrition transition in many developing countries has been characterised by a transition from under- to overnutrition. The set of South African FBDGs embodies principles and concepts and makes recommendations to help prevent this phenomenon.

The working group can also be commended because at this stage the guidelines have already been tested for comprehension, appropriateness and applicability in consumer groups of different communities. This shows a scientific approach which will assist in the implementation of the guidelines.

Implementation is the next challenge. The availability of adequate resources is a prerequisite. To be successful, it is recommended that a structured approach should be followed

in developing a framework and strategies appropriate for the South African situation.

It is now generally accepted that to be effective, dietary interventions (such as implementation of the FBDGs at a population level) should be comprehensive, population-based, integrated, multidisciplinary and multisectorial. Therefore, implementation should involve a complementary range of actions, from policy, environmental, community and individual levels. The challenge is to integrate these dietary recommendations into a national plan of action aimed at promoting appropriate diets, physical activity and healthy lifestyles.

The working group based the development of the guidelines on prevailing eating patterns and diet-related health issues. In implementation, existing lifestyles, attitudes, social, economic and environmental issues in different communities should also be taken into account and should direct strategies for specific groups.

South African nutritionists have an advocacy role in ensuring that these FBDGs receive sufficient media and political exposure to be incorporated into health policy. But they also have an educational role in ensuring that all professionals in public health understand the potential of the guidelines to help improve dietary intakes, nutritional status and health, and in the prevention of diet-related diseases. Continuous monitoring of the impact of the guidelines would be necessary to evaluate how successful implementation is. The working group has indicated that the guidelines should be reviewed and adapted regularly, taking into account changes in society and new information about the relationships between nutrition and health. Nutritionists should embrace this task with enthusiasm. The outcomes in improved nutrition, development and health would make this a meaningful and worthwhile task.

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