

The Quality of Food

At present, concern is mounting in both medical and lay Press over the quality of food. Recent misgivings included a contribution on 'Wholesomeness of foodstuffs' in *WHO Chronicle*,¹ a cover story in *Time* on 'The perils of overeating—American style',² and an editorial in the *London Times* on 'The great food hazard'.³ In the WHO publication, it was stated, 'To-day, an ever-increasing number of chemical agents is being employed to protect crops, livestock and stored food . . . their use seems likely to be a permanent feature of agricultural and horticultural practice. Unfortunately, some of the pesticides now being employed are not only toxic to the pests against which they are used, but may also constitute a serious danger to man if improperly used . . .' In the *Times* article, it was stated, 'At the front of the skirmish we have a highly sophisticated food-processing industry whose chemists can dye yolks of egg yellow, fatten chickens with sodium phosphate, manipulate tasteless flesh all the while injecting flavour from game paté to "traditional chicken"; which can first create the food then the demand through vast advertising campaigns . . .' 'Farmers are constantly under commercial pressures to apply more vitamins, vaccines, hormones, feed additives, growth regulators, herbicides, pesticides and trace elements. Arsenical compounds are used increasingly in pig farming. Recently it was observed that the food industry may be in the position of the tobacco industry fifty years ago; marketing a product of unknown hazard . . .' 'Of course it is not only health that concerns people, criticisms abound about low quality food—tasteless and fishy poultry, watery whites of eggs, weak shells, pale yolks — while there is increasing sadness over our agricultural methods. The concern is arrogantly dispatched by interested industries as sentimental crankiness'.³

Reacting, vehemently at times, against this trend,

there are increasing numbers of people who assign some, or many, of the present-day illnesses of our society to just these and kindred practices. One outcome is the fantastically increasing popularity of 'health foods' in whose production organic manures, and not chemical fertilisers, have been used, and in which pesticides, preservatives, colouring matter, emulsifiers, and the like, are not employed. The article in *Time* stated that true organic produce costs 30% more than the conventional items.² But in a recent USA Agriculture Department price survey of a mini-shopping basket, the cost differential was far greater, namely, 5,36 dollars compared with 2,23 dollars. The basket included apple juice, peaches, cornmeal, honey, whole frozen chicken, and cucumbers.⁴

Two crucial questions arise. Firstly, what precisely is the magnitude of the health hazard resulting from manipulations of food production and preparation, such as have just been described? Secondly, to what extent are benefits to health demonstrable in those habituated to the consumption of organic, compared with those accustomed to conventional foods? Regarding the first question, while many concerned with the health of the public are convinced that the hazards, direct and indirect, from food sophistication are real, it has to be faced that specific incriminating evidence in respect of morbidity and mortality data is lacking. The same inadequacy of evidence obtains with the second question. It must, of course, be made clear that the issue under discussion is simply the nutritional value of foodstuffs produced by conventional compared with unconventional means.

Some authorities believe that health food enthusiasts, in their desire for more wholesome and nourishing food, may be doing even a disservice to the cause of improved nutrition. Jean Mayer in-

cluded 'health foods' in what he calls 'nutritional quackery', which, he robustly stated, 'systematically undermines the confidence of American people in their food supply, in their physicians, and in their universities . . . The medical profession and the universities are alleged to be in league with the food manufacturers in their exploitation of the of the public'.⁵ Outright unqualified condemnation is unjustified, yet understandable in view of the often extravagant claims made by the purer food protagonists. These claims, however, are now coming under scrutiny in the USA, where the Food

and Drug Administration is carefully examining the position regarding nutritional labelling.³

In this important matter of the quality of present-day food, it is probable that only representations of the Ralph Nader type are likely to reveal the extent of the dangers, real and apparent, in current practices in the cultivation, production and processing of the national food.

1. Lu, F. C. (1973): *WHO Chron.*, 27, 245.
2. *Time* (1972): 18 December, p. 52.
3. *London Times* (1973): 8 August, p. 5.
4. *Ladies Home Journal* (1973): April issue, p. 36.
5. Mayer, J. (1972): *Human Nutrition*. Springfield: C. C. Thomas.

Foto's van Pasiënte

Dit is onvermybaar dat foto's van pasiënte van tyd tot tyd in die mediese vakliteratuur verskyn, en dit is ook nie altyd moontlik om die gesigte toe te plak nie, want soms is dit juis die gesig van die pasiënt wat van belang is. Oor die algemeen is dit wenslik dat skrywers van artikels seker maak dat hul pasiënte onherkenbaar is deur die hele gesig, of ten minste net die oë, te verberg, en in ieder geval mag die naam nooit op enige foto verskyn nie. Indien dit onwenslik is om die pasiënt se gesig onherkenbaar te maak, moet daar toestemming verkry word en moet die Redakteur van sodanige instemming in kennis gestel word.

Sodanige foto's verskyn ten minste altyd met 'n goeie doel voor oë en hulle is essensieël tot die gerapporteerde navorsing, maar dit is nie die geval wanneer foto's van pasiënte in hospitale en ander inrigtings in die lekepers verskyn nie. Sulke publikasies is slegs gemoeid met die nuuswaarde van een of ander patologiese toestand, hetsy 'n ongeluk of 'n seldsame siekte. Met tye wonder 'n mens hoe die fotograaf dit reggekry het om toestemming te verkry om die foto te neem, en soms bestaan die vermoede dat geen toestemming gevra is nie. Dit is helaas waar dat vele sulke foto's onsmaklik is, en totaal onregverdigbare inbreuk op die pasiënt se privaatheid verteenwoordig.

Is dit wenslik dat 'n foto van 'n bewustelose vrou in 'n koerant verskyn, veral as dit na 'n ongeluk is wat haar gesig geskend het? Het dit enige werklike nuuswaarde anders as 'n toegewing aan die sieklike nuuskieriges wat hulle verheug in die makabere? Dit is te hope dat enige fotograaf wat sonder toe-

stemming sodanige foto's neem, deeglik beetgekry sal word. Om sy kamera te konfiskeer vir toekomstige hospitaalgebruik sou vir ons 'n regverdige en goeie straf skyn te wees—veral as dit 'n lekker duur model is. Ons kan werklik nie wesentlike verskil sien tussen die steel van naakfoto's deur 'n gordynskrefie en die publikasie van foto's van 'n bewustelose sonder dat daar enige behoorlike toestemming verkry is nie.

Wie moet toestemming gee? In die eerste plek moet die pasiënt natuurlik instem as hy of sy daartoe in staat is. Anders moet 'n naasbestaande geraadpleeg word. Ten tweede moet die verpleegster in bevel van die betrokke saal haar toestemming gee dat foto's van pasiënte onder haar sorg geneem word. Sy sal dit natuurlik moet doen met die medewete van die matrone en die superintendent, en dit is trouens laasgenoemde se konsent wat finaal ook verkry moet word. Waar daar 'n spesifieke geneesheer by betrokke is, soos in die geval van 'n privaatpasiënt, is sy toestemming vanselfsprekend ook noodsaaklik. Na ongevallen waar die hele hospitaal-span met die pasiënt doenig is, kan die superintendent seker as die verantwoordelike geneesheer beskou word.

Almal stem saam dat 'n lyk wat langs die pad lê na 'n motorongeluk met 'n kombes of iets bedek moet word uit respek vir die dooie. Tog het die oorledende daar eintlik geen belang meer by nie. Maar in die geval van 'n tydelik bewustelose wat later weer tot die gemeenskap moet toetree, het ons skynbaar nie dieselfde etiese dissipline nie. Waarom nie?