

BRIEFING NOTE

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NUTRITION HEALTH PROFESSIONALS: "OPTIMUM NUTRITION"

In September 2004 the Nutrition Society published a Department of Health funded report on "Understanding the differences between nutrition health professionals"¹. The report revealed the extent to which consumers appear to be fascinated by the links between food and health but are confused by the different types of individuals who give nutrition advice and are thus prevented from making informed choices. This confusion is no more apparent than in relation to what 'optimum nutrition' means to dietitians, nutritionists and nutritional therapists. This briefing note aims to clarify the position so that consumers can be clear as to the differences.

- (1) For **dietitians** and **nutritionists** (registered with the Nutrition Society) advising a client on optimum nutrition comprises^{2,3}:
 - ◇ taking measurements appropriate to body mass
 - ◇ explaining the links between different foods (e.g. meats, vegetables, fruits, convenience foods, drinks) and nutrient composition using the 'Balance of Good Health' model (www.eatwell.gov.uk)
 - ◇ reviewing and analysing the client's food diary, nutritional plan and other lifestyle changes to promote health.
- (2) **Public health nutritionists, toxicologists** and **food scientists** work together to provide policy managers and legislators with advice needed to promote health in the population at large. In particular with regard to micronutrients, they need to establish levels of benefit and of risk and look at ranges of intake values which need to be both nutritionally adequate and non-toxic for the whole population. In this instance optimum nutrition is defined as "the intake at which there are equivalent risks of both inadequacy and toxicity" providing that "data on both are of equal quality, are related to hazards of comparable severity and are equally well defined"⁴.
- (3) For **nutritional therapists** (who practise Complementary and Alternative Medicine) optimum nutrition encompasses *individual* prescriptions for diet and lifestyle in order to alleviate or prevent ailments and to promote optimal gene expression through all life stages. Recommendations may include guidance on natural detoxification, procedures to promote colon health, methods to support digestion and absorption, the avoidance of toxins or allergens and the appropriate use of supplementary nutrients, including phytonutrients. Nutritional therapists advise on each person's *unique* dietary and nutritional needs for metabolic and hormonal homeostasis, using a variety of biochemical and functional tests to inform recommended protocols and programmes.

References:

1. Nutrition Society (2004) Understanding the differences between nutrition health professionals www.nutrition society.org
2. Skills for Health Allied Health Professionals' Competences 13 and 14. www.skillsforhealth.org.uk
3. The British Dietetic Association and the Nutrition Society (2002) Joint Professional Development Guidance on the Employment of Nutritionists in NHS Nutrition and Dietetic Departments.
4. Renwick, AG *et al* (2004) Risk-benefit analysis of micronutrients. *Food Chem. Toxicol.* 42 (1902-1922).