On the clear need to meet and learn to speak clearly: statement from the World Health Organization\textsuperscript{1,2}

Elisabet Helsing

ABSTRACT Dietary assessment, a young subspecialty of nutrition science, includes most of the elements that are unique to the science. The lack of common definitions of terms, and hence, of an unequivocal terminology, often frustrates communication efforts in the field. Furthermore, scientists from the easternmost parts of Europe, whose career advancement depended for a long time on avoiding mistakes, may find it enigmatic that dietary assessment methods demand a focus on finding and describing errors. The opportunity to meet and exchange views in the classic way—by direct dialogue—that is offered by conferences such as this one should help to bring about the common understanding required for good communication. \textit{Am J Clin Nutr} 1997;65(suppl):1098S–9S.

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After the success of the First International Conference on Dietary Assessment Methods, this second meeting on dietary assessment is an indicator of whether gatherings on the subject are really worth organizing. In an age of electronic communication—to which nutritionists in particular subscribe—is there really a need for the old-fashioned “word of mouth”? Judging from the number of participants at this conference, there is.

Apparently, we still have a lot to learn from one another in the area of dietary assessment about the slow and arduous process of collecting vast amounts of data, the battle to mold them into some shape, and finally the wrestling of meaning from them. Because there are features of this process that are unique to the science of nutrition, adequate answers to questions about dietary assessment could not be obtained at, for example, a conference of epidemiologists. Thus, dietary investigators must meet.

Dietary assessment includes most of the elements unique to the science of nutrition: establishing food-composition databases, setting nutrient reference values, and, of course, assessing food intake. Because nutrition is a young science, hardly any older than epidemiology, we are currently in its toddler age, scientifically speaking. We are still struggling to find our language, with all the problems that entails. Sometimes, for example, we use similar words to denote different things or different words for similar things. For many years, the terms used to indicate nutrient norms were either \textit{recommended dietary allowances} (RDAs) or \textit{recommended daily intakes} (RDIs); these were used interchangeably and unsystematically and often without proper definitions of what the recommendations were meant to cover or for whom they were designed. Current usage leans toward the new term \textit{dietary reference values} (1), but this vocabulary has not quite taken hold and, at least in Europe, the old RDA and RDI terminology has recently been replaced with at least two new terms: \textit{reference nutrient intake} and \textit{population reference intake} (2).

In non-English-speaking countries, confusion is still rife, as becomes clear from a review of the titles attached to current national recommendations, especially those meant to cover both micronutrients and macronutrients and often for good measure their conversion to the foods that people eat. A plethora of concepts are used, not all of which reflect the same reality. National dietary guidelines or dietary recommendations sometimes refer to food-based advice, occasionally to nutrient reference values, often to a mixture of quantitative reference values and qualitative considerations, and sometimes also to recommendations on food preparation and dietary pattern.

Practical people, such as nutrition policymakers, may have difficulty with this semantic Tower of Babel. Whereas physiologists and physicians may accept dealing in nutrients, nutrition policymakers act in terms of foods—tons of foods. They set their specific objectives with respect to concrete food-level goals, and they make food-level forecasts. The various dietary guidelines sometimes seem to represent an honest attempt on the part of scientists to speak in terms that will also be understandable to practical people and in policy contexts, such as when \textit{eggs} and \textit{berries} make an appearance alongside \textit{fat-energy percentage} or mix in with nebulous moralisms such as “do not eat too much or too little.” Still, nutrition scientists have a long way to go before they share a common understanding of the particular terminology that the profession uses to communicate. When will those who do the communicating appreciate the differences between requirements and recommendations or between nutrient-level reference values, food goals, and dietary advice to the public? How long will it be before the results of dietary assessment studies are examined in light of standards developed in terms of probability of deficiency rather than arbitrarily chosen cutoff points?

Although the differing terminology does not necessarily conceal basic differences of opinion, there is an inherent risk

\textsuperscript{1} From the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, Copenhagen.

\textsuperscript{2} Address reprint requests to E Helsing, Trosterudveien 19, N-0386, Oslo, Norway. E-mail: ehelsing@powertech.no.
that people with poorly defined scientific terminology will talk past one another and engage in fruitless dialogue—as the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization did for a time in the early 1990s—on, for example, the relative merits of quantitative compared with qualitative dietary recommendations.

In my view, the only way to overcome the semantic obstacles is to engage in dialogue the old-fashioned way: mouth to mouth, mind to mind. The urgent need for this may be part of the reason why so many found their way to this conference. We hope that by engaging in dialogue, discussion, and exchange of opinion (or by listening to others who do), we shall better understand the problems we battle on a daily basis.

Another reason why Europeans are so fascinated with dietary assessment is related to the current stage of development of this field. A science so preoccupied with examining its own weaknesses, that relentlessly seeks, even roots for, sources of error seems somewhat enigmatic to many Europeans. In particular, there are parts of Europe—those furthest to the east—where for years various penalties were possible if you admitted you had made a mistake and where, therefore, much of daily life was spent avoiding the responsibility for making errors. To Europeans from such areas, the obsession with finding and measuring sources of error may seem perverse.

Yet the old continent—east, as well as west, south, and north—now seems to be gradually accepting that there is an acute need for this young and striving part of nutrition science. We need information about what populations eat and we need critical evaluations of our findings. We need common reference values against which we can examine results. We are getting there, and we are grateful to the hosts of this conference for providing us with an opportunity for international exchange, for dialogue, and for finding our errors so that we can either learn to live graciously with them or improve on them and become stronger and more relevant in the process.

REFERENCES