Some fifteen years ago, the idea of convening a professional conference focusing on vegetarian nutrition was first suggested. After several years of planning, the First International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition was held in Washington, DC, in 1987 (1). Since that time, at 5-7 intervals, additional congresses have been convened (2). The most recent was held at Loma Linda University in California in March of 1997. The proceedings of this congress are presented herein.

From antiquity, vegetarian diets have been followed for a variety of reasons, albeit with widely different nutritional outcomes. Accordingly, many scientific and professional questions have been raised. The international congresses on vegetarian nutrition were organized to investigate these issues, evaluate the outcomes, ponder the questions, stimulate new research, and provide practical applications.

Through the years, vegetarians have been questioned, ridiculed, and considered to be eccentrics. More recently, however, vegetarian diets have become an accepted option for obtaining the nutrients we all need. Nonetheless, there continues to be great diversity among vegetarians in their dietary practices, and not all vegetarians are aware of the issues that must be addressed if optimal nutritional status is to be the outcome. As a consequence of the increased interest in vegetarian diets, health care professionals are encountering growing numbers of individuals calling themselves vegetarians. Thus, there is need for information on vegetarian nutrition to be widely disseminated to both professionals and the public.

Examples of recent publications designed to support both health care professionals and practicing vegetarians include the well-organized and comprehensive Dietitian's Guide to Vegetarian Diets (3); the most recent revision of the American Dietetic Association’s position statement on vegetarian diets (4); a new publication edited by Mark Messina, Vegetarian Nutrition: An International Journal; and a university-based monthly newsletter, the Vegetarian Nutrition and Health Letter, that focuses on vegetarian nutrition issues. In addition, numerous books providing practical information and recipes have been published.

Although most of the information presented at this congress focused on the dietary practices of vegetarians, it has broader applications for the general population. In the past few years, much information has accumulated on the health effects of plant foods such as cereals, legumes, nuts, fruit, and vegetables. The evidence comes from basic science and clinical and epidemiologic research. This information was reviewed and presented at the congress as part of a symposium on plant foods and health and constitutes a good share of these proceedings.

The term plant-based diet has come into vogue in recent years and describes the eating patterns of persons who decrease their use of animal products and increase their use of plant foods even though they do not intend to become vegetarians. It may also describe diets that, of necessity, contain only small amounts of animal foods. Lactoovovegetarian diets are indeed plant-based, and results of large epidemiologic studies in populations following such diets were presented at the congress.

Current interests in the field of nutrition in general were reflected in presentations examining bone status of vegetarians, dietary choices to achieve adequate calcium intakes from plant foods, and the adequacy of various types of vegetarian diets to supply essential fatty acids, particularly docosahexaenoic acid. The relation between vegetarian diets and physical fitness was also discussed.

As before, this congress emphasized practical applications. The first congress included a review of the diverse vegetarian food guides then extant (5) and the second congress presented a vegetarian food guide based on food groups (6). The third congress included the presentation of a new vegetarian food guide pyramid developed through consensus by a group of nutrition scientists representing various institutions and dietary traditions. It is recognized that dietary choices are the result of personal decisions that are based on differing philosophical approaches. Individuals representing such differing views participated in a panel discussion of the convergence of various vegetarian dietary practices.

It is the hope of the organizers of this congress that these proceedings will stimulate new research, provide useful information to health care professionals, and ultimately benefit the individuals who choose to consume vegetarian and plant-based diets.

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REFERENCES