Preface

In this supplement we present the Proceedings of the Fourth International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition. This Journal has also published the proceedings from the 3 previous congresses (1–3). Since the first congress in 1987, 3 trends have clearly emerged with respect to vegetarian nutrition. First, there has been a steady rise in the number of people who claim to be vegetarians. In fact, in 1994, 12.4 million people in the United States reported themselves to be vegetarians, which is double the number in 1986 (4). With more literature supporting the health benefits of vegetarian diets being published, this number as well as the number of people wanting more plant-based food choices in their daily lives will undoubtedly continue to increase. Second, research in vegetarian nutrition has gone from just addressing adequacy issues to examining the health benefits conferred by vegetarian diet choices, especially in preventing chronic diseases. Current research has expanded from exploring only the traditional micronutrients (vitamin B-12, iron) to looking at other essential nutrients such as n-3 fatty acids. Third, professional interest in vegetarian nutrition has reached an all-time high, with an increase in the publication rate of articles in vegetarian research, particularly original contributions in vegetarian nutrition (4). Thus, there is a continued need to summarize and disseminate information on the nutritional and health implications of vegetarian diets.

As in previous congresses, participants in this congress discussed recent work in the areas of vegetarian diets and chronic disease risk, epidemiologic studies on vegetarians, and adequacy issues related to vegetarian diets. In addition, there were 2 special symposia. The first was a forum to explore and discuss the challenges of nutrients, foods, and dietary patterns as exposures in diet and health research. Although this theme is not unique to vegetarian nutrition, the complex nature of vegetarian diet patterns makes it relevant. Discussions of dietary patterns as exposures is an essential concept in understanding the intricacies of diet-disease associations.

Vegetarian diets have been followed for a variety of reasons, including the sustainability of our food supply. Natural resource use, agricultural practices, and animal husbandry may affect the quantity and quality of plant and animal foods produced. In this broader context, the second special symposium discussed the ecological and environmental impacts of different dietary choices.

Besides the main symposia, there were over 60 short oral and poster presentations at the congress. This provided a broader and more international perspective on vegetarian nutrition. We appreciate the contributions made by the more than 400 attendees who came from over 40 different countries. We thank them for their support and sustained interest in this area. We hope that the information shared in this supplement will stimulate continued interest and new ideas for future research.

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REFERENCES