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Symposium on ‘Micronutrient interactions and public health’

Food Standards Agency: nutrition

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The Food Standards Agency undertakes a range of activities with the aim of improving the dietary health of the population and determining how best to communicate key messages to achieve dietary change. Activities include obtaining sound evidence from research and surveys, and seeking advice from independent experts. Work is also undertaken to inform and motivate the population about diet and to identify ways of improving their diet. The effectiveness of the work is monitored in order to inform future policy decisions and interventions and to understand cost implications.

Food Standards Agency: Diet and health: Dietary change strategies

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is an independent non-ministerial government department. The FSA was set up by an Act of Parliament in 2000 to protect the public’s health and consumer interests in relation to food. The key aims of the FSA are outlined in its ‘Strategic Plan 2001 to 2006’ (Food Standards Agency, 2001*b*). In 2005 the FSA will set new aims and objectives for the next 5 years, which are currently being developed through public and stakeholder consultation.

The work of the FSA is underpinned by three guiding principles: putting the consumer first; being open and accessible; being an independent voice.

The key aim for the Nutrition Division of the FSA is to achieve long-term improvements in the diet and nutrition of the UK population and reduce inequalities by enabling and encouraging the disadvantaged and vulnerable to improve their diets. The FSA also aims to achieve improvements in food labelling.

Delivering nutrition aims

Responsibility for a number of nutrition areas is shared with Health Departments. The FSA nutrition strategy has been agreed by the FSA Board and is detailed in its ‘Nutrition Action Plan’ (Food Standards Agency, 2001*c*).

The broad elements are:

- securing a sound evidence base for action to promote a healthy diet;
- identifying and addressing barriers to changing dietary behaviour;
- developing appropriate means of informing the general population;
- evaluating and monitoring the effectiveness of action taken.

In carrying out this strategy the FSA looks at every stage of the food chain, working with industry and consumers on a broad range of issues to see how all stakeholders can contribute to better health, and be involved in finding solutions. This procedure includes work on food labelling and claims, on which the FSA represents the UK in EU negotiation.

Dietary goals

The FSA is working towards helping more of the population to consume a diet that is in line with UK dietary recommendations. In the broadest terms *The Balance of Good Health* (Food Standards Agency, 2001*a*) advises the population to eat a variety of foods, more fruit

Abbreviation: FSA, Food Standards Agency.

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and vegetables, more starchy foods and more foods rich in fibre. They are also advised to eat the right amount for a healthy weight and to eat less fatty food (particularly saturated fat), salt and sugar. These recommendations are based on advice from independent nutritional experts and are in line with those set by the World Health Organization/Food and Agriculture Organization (2003).

The FSA and the Department of Health are advised on matters related to diet, nutrition and health by the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (www.sacn.gov.uk), which is chaired by Professor Alan Jackson. This committee was established in 2001 and succeeded the Committee on the Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy.

Securing evidence

In order to improve the diet of the population, it is necessary to understand what constitutes a healthy diet and what is presently being eaten. This approach applies to both the general population and specific subgroups whose circumstances may present particular problems. The FSA research and survey programme aims to understand the diet of the population and its subgroups, and its links with health. Work is also undertaken to further understand the influences giving rise to diet problems and to evaluate intervention approaches.

Nutrition research

Evidence shows that health is dependent on food and nutrient intake; however, the FSA recognises that there is a need to develop further detailed evidence in this area to enable the provision and development of scientific dietary guidance for the population and its subgroups.

Research on the link between diet and health is carried out in three programmes:

- diet and cardiovascular health: this programme focuses on the biological effects of dietary components such as dietary lipids and plant foods;
- diet and colonic health: this programme chiefly looks at biomarkers of colo-rectal cancer;
- optimal nutrition: this programme addresses specific issues in relation to micronutrient intakes and issues relating to subgroups that would influence the targeting of dietary advice. The overall aim is to provide a scientific basis for population and subpopulation level dietary guidelines for optimal health.

Surveys

The FSA has an ongoing programme of population surveys. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey series provides detailed consumption and nutritional status data for individuals. Subgroups of the population (preschool children and young people, adults aged 19–64 years and people aged ≥65 years) are surveyed on an ongoing basis. The most recent National Diet and Nutrition Survey was completed in 2001 and is being published as five separate volumes, of which four have been published: vol. 1 (Henderson *et al.*

2002); vol. 2 (Henderson *et al.* 2003a); vol. 3 (Henderson *et al.* 2003b); vol. 4 (Ruston *et al.* 2004). More information on this survey is given by Swan (2004). Data are currently being collected for a Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey. In 2006 the survey is due to report baseline data on food consumption, nutrient intakes and nutritional status, and factors affecting these data in low-income and materially-deprived consumers. Data from this survey will help the FSA to understand and address barriers to the uptake of a healthy balanced diet by low-income groups.

To understand the nutrient intake of the population and how individual foods contribute, and to predict how changes in composition may affect nutrient intake, surveys of foods are required. For example, mini surveys have looked at the nutritional composition of ready meals and sausages, and focused on foods in children's school lunch boxes and the meals provided in secondary schools.

Barriers to changing dietary behaviour

The FSA aims to find out what information is required by the general public and specific groups about healthy eating and to determine the best means of communicating key messages. Identifying and understanding what the barriers are that stop individuals and groups from accepting diet and health messages is critical to changing dietary behaviour.

Research

The 'Food Acceptability and Choice' research programme examines the major factors influencing food choices, particularly the barriers to healthier dietary choices, and test interventions that could help overcome these barriers.

Work in schools

In addition to work under the Food Acceptability and Choice Programme, the FSA has a number of projects that aim to enable children to make healthier food choices. These projects include work on food-related knowledge and practical skills (competencies) aimed at young people. Other work includes recommendations, advice and training for those who care for looked-after children (Caroline Walker Trust, 2001).

Developing appropriate means of informing the general population

Providing consumers with information about food composition and the benefits of healthy eating is a fundamental first step in enabling a shift towards healthy diets. Consumers are confronted almost daily with information about diet, nutrition and health in newspapers and magazines, and on the radio and television. They are becoming increasingly aware of, and interested in, the relationship between what they eat and their health.

The FSA provides a range of published information (e.g. consumer or life stage leaflets, newspaper columns now reaching approximately two million readers per

week through regional publications) and website-based information on its healthy eating recommendations and the principle of a balanced diet.

Evaluating and monitoring

The FSA is keen to assess the effectiveness of the work it undertakes in order to inform future policy decisions and interventions and to understand cost implications. A broad range of evaluation and monitoring of programmes takes place. Results from this evaluation are fed into policy development, including the initiation and evolution of programmes, guidance and information sources. In addition, specific activities are discussed with stakeholders.

Concluding points

The FSA is an established UK government department. A major part of the FSA work is directed towards public health nutrition with the aim of improving the nation's nutritional well-being. Progress is judged against a framework set out in the Nutrition Action Plan and is reported to the FSA Board. Members of the public can attend meetings of the FSA Board and papers are available on the FSA website (www.food.gov.uk), where regular updates can be accessed.

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