The 7th International Vahouny Fibre Symposium was held at the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh on 27–30 May 2002

Symposium on 'Dietary fibre in health and disease'
Session: General aspects of dietary fibre

Introduction

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The Vahouny Symposia have been held in Washington, DC, USA since 1981. In the preface of the second Symposium Proceedings, one of the founders, George Vahouny (1984) spoke of the symposium being an outgrowth of belief that informal discussion among peers was the most effective way to organise current knowledge and to direct our thinking. The Symposium and its published proceedings were considered singularly successful in achieving these goals. The result was a free exchange of ideas and the establishment of collaborations based on mutual interest and friendship.

The symposia have always been deeply mindful of the debt we owe to those who went before, and in this respect Surgeon Captain TL Cleave's contribution was acknowledged. The other pioneers Hugh Trowell, Denis Burkitt, David Southgate and Alex Walker spoke at the early meetings, which were organised by David Kritchevsky, George Vahouny and Charlie Bonfield. It was, therefore, consistent with this sense of history and loss that when George Vahouny unexpectedly died, the symposia were given his name. His intellect, fun and enthusiasm are still missed. Since then Dave Kritchevsky and Charlie Bonfield have organised six more symposia in Washington DC. The consensus feeling was that a trip abroad would be appropriate, and the European contribution to our understanding of dietary fibre recognised. So the seventh meeting came to Edinburgh. Again, history is there because the first Dietary Fibre meeting was held in Edinburgh and published in the *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society* (Nutrition Society, 1973). It is, therefore, pleasing that this meeting is being published again in the *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*.

Reading the chapters from the first meeting (Vahouny Fibre Symposium, 1982) the themes in the seventh were again familiar. Four speakers from the first meeting spoke in the seventh, including Jim Anderson, Martin Eastwood, Mike Hill and Dave Kritchevsky.

For some time, progress in dietary fibre research has been slow and modest because of the formidable problems of measurement, both analytical and physical, and being able to concentrate on areas where fibre might have realistic physiological activity and/or health benefits. This meeting, however, signalled rapid advances in our understanding of the action of dietary fibre and associated foods, with young scientists leading the way. The alliances being forged with other disciplines, physical chemistry and molecular biology as well as the traditional epidemiology, have enabled dietary fibre to become once more a real growth area.

A further tradition of these meetings has been the award of the Vahouny medal to eminent contributors to the field of fibre research. This year two medals were given, to Jim Anderson and Charlie Bonfield.

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