Introduction by Chizuru Nishida

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This issue of SCN News highlights the global challenge involved in effectively addressing the increasing public health problem of overweight and obesity. Our goal is to update readers and raise awareness of the issues related to overweight and obesity from a broad perspective and highlight recent global efforts and actions for their prevention and control.

Our article introduces the development of the WHO Global Database on Body Mass Index (BMI) as a global interactive surveillance tool to monitor nutrition transition and provides some initial analyses based on the available adult BMI data. We highlight the lack of nationally representative cross-sectional data, particularly for the countries in Africa, as an obstacle in monitoring the magnitude of current and future nutrition problems worldwide. Schmidhuber and Shetty’s article demonstrates a very complex, but very valuable, aspect of the increasing problems of overweight and obesity, reviewed from the food and agricultural development perspective. Hawkes et al, further address a dual burden of under- and overnutrition being faced, particularly in developing countries from the perspective of food policy. They emphasize the need for more food policy research to redirect the nutrition transition towards optimal diets and good health.

Yet another complex aspect of overweight and obesity problems is described by Labbok in her review of recent studies related to breastfeeding and development of obesity later in life. This emphasizes the fact that, like undernutrition and nutritional deficiencies, the problems of overweight and obesity need to be addressed in the context of the life course. Adapting the life cycle causal links for undernutrition described in the report to the ACC/SCN by the Commission on the Nutrition Challenges of the 21st Century,1 Darnton-Hill, Nishida and James2 proposed a lifecourse approach to diet, nutrition and the prevention of chronic diseases in order to review the processes and environmental and societal influences that cause the risks of various chronic diseases. This lifecourse approach was then adopted by the joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation3 when reviewing the changes in dietary and health patterns worldwide and examining their relationship to emergence of chronic diseases, particularly obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases, cancer, dental disease, and osteoporosis.

The articles by de Onis and Lobstein highlight the emerging problem of overweight and obesity among children, which can no longer be ignored. In 1997, the WHO Expert Consultation4 identified increasing overweight and obesity in childhood as emerging childhood health problems which need urgent public health attention. Unfortunately, not much action has been taken so far to address the overweight and obesity problems among children. One of the difficulties identified by the Consultation was a lack of agreement on the classification of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents. There has been confusion both in terms of a globally applicable reference population and in the selection of appropriate cut-off points for designating a child as obese. However, with the completion of the WHO Multicentre Growth Reference Study and construction of a new WHO growth reference, WHO may now be in a position to propose a recommendation for cut-off points for school-age children and adolescents to be used globally for monitoring childhood overweight and obesity. Furthermore, there has been increasing recognition among the global public health community as well as by WHO Member States for the need to develop effective strategies for preventing childhood overweight and obesity in many parts of the world. In response to this growing concern, WHO will organize an expert consultation on childhood obesity from 20-24 June 2005. The objectives of the Consultation are to: 1) review the prevalence and magnitude of childhood overweight and obesity; 2) review the recommendation for cut-off points for school-age children and adolescents to be used for monitoring childhood overweight and obesity; 3) review and assess the impact of on-going undernutrition intervention programmes on increasing overweight and obesity in children in countries; 4) review the outcome of the updated Cochrane systematic review on the prevention of childhood obesity and lessons learned from countries that have implemented prevention strategies; 5) identify and define types of strategies, and the possible obstacles for their implementation; and 6) identify further research needs.
The Consultation is expected to i) develop a guide for countries to strengthen their national nutrition monitoring and surveillance system for school-age children and adolescents, and ii) develop and implement effective strategies for addressing the increasing public health problem of childhood obesity.

The editorial of James, who served as a reviewer for these six papers, also highlights the complexity of the social, cultural and economic context in which the problem of overweight and obesity needs to be addressed. He further emphasizes the need for a new perspective and a fundamental rethinking of approaches in addressing the ever complex problems of malnutrition, whether it is undernutrition or overweight and obesity.

Much has changed in the international context of macro-policy on food and nutrition since the 1974 World Food Conference. Each decade had its solemn government pledges to eliminate hunger and reduce all forms of malnutrition. World declarations and governments’ commitments in these matters have increased in scope, detail and endorsement, allowing the development of multiple global strategies and goals for the millennium. However, we repeatedly learn that making commitments is one thing, but that being able to deliver and implement those commitments has proven more problematic. The experience of WHO, in close collaboration with FAO and other partner agencies, in supporting countries to develop, strengthen and implement national intersectoral food and nutrition plans and policies demonstrates that even when political commitment exists, there is very little “buy-in” from senior officials even in the health and agriculture sectors. Furthermore, significant capacity gaps exist at all levels in understanding the required intersectoral responses to the increasing complexity of food and nutrition policy-making for addressing the whole spectrum of nutrition problems.

To overcome these gaps, the combined efforts of SCN members are needed to form a revolutionary interaction and collaboration among all stakeholders.

References


