

## More than a grain of evidence but effective communication is key

This issue of *Nutrition Bulletin* features two papers focusing on the current evidence of the potential benefits of wholegrain foods and describing ongoing activities to help to promote public awareness and increase their consumption (Richardson, p. 145; Seal *et al.*, p. 129). There is now growing epidemiological evidence that regularly including wholegrain foods and food products in the diet is linked with reduced risk of heart disease, diabetes, cancer and premature death, and possibly lower bodyweight. This has been recognised in the recent recommendations from the School Food Trust on the development and implementation of food standards for school foods other than lunch, where the provision of wholegrain cereals, for example, is encouraged as a healthier breakfast alternative (see Denny, p. 81). Whole grains contain a plethora of nutrients and other substances that may have synergistic effects in protecting health, although as yet the exact mechanism and specific components behind their beneficial role remain unclear. As consumers of wholegrain foods are typically from higher socio-economic groups and have other favourable dietary and lifestyle practices, for example, they are less likely to smoke and are often more physically active, it is difficult for observational studies to control for these many potential confounding factors. Whilst cohort studies suggest that these variables do not explain all of the reduction in risk of disease observed among high wholegrain consumers, the need for randomised controlled trials is apparent. The results of ongoing large randomised trials such as WHOLEheart and RISCK (see Buttriss 2006 and Seal *et al.*, p. 129) are therefore eagerly awaited.

Much of the wholegrain research to date has focused on wheat-based products but of course other grains, with subtly different properties, are available to us such as rye (Buttriss 2006) and barley, including bere barley grown traditionally in the Orkneys (Theobald *et al.* 2006).

Although studies suggest that even low levels of intake (between two and three servings per day) can offer benefit, the consumption of wholegrain foods in the UK is poor (Seal *et al.*, p. 129). This simple dietary modification is potentially relatively easy to achieve but effective communication of the wholegrain health message is essential to increase awareness of the importance of their inclusion in the diet. As described by Dr Unusan, who has investigated the persuasive impact of different styles of nutrition messages among young people at a university in Turkey (p. 100), message style is key in health communication. Positively constructed advice, which is clearly an advantage of the wholegrain message (*i.e.* eating more will benefit health), is usually more persuasive with consumers. However, many other barriers need to be tackled, including confusion around the precise definition of wholegrain and exactly which products meet the criteria. Also critical is ensuring that there is access to a range of convenient, tasty and inexpensive wholegrain foods that are easy to incorporate into our current eating patterns. This is the main focus of the HEALTHGRAIN project which will hopefully lead to the development of a wide range of innovative wholegrain products that consumers will enjoy and find easy to incorporate regularly into their diets (see Richardson, p. 145).

There is considerable attention being paid currently to provision of effective nutritional labelling and front-of-pack signposting on foods in the UK. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has now published its recommendations for a front-of-pack signposting scheme that focuses on fat, saturates, salt and sugars – all attributes of foods targeted for reduction (see Denny, p. 84). This scheme will be voluntary and as yet it is unclear how extensive its adoption will be, given that many retailers and some manufacturers have already introduced their own schemes across a wider range of food categories than are being targeted by the FSA. There are currently no plans to extend the FSA scheme to include positive attributes of a food such as its wholegrain content, or even its fibre content. Nevertheless, a number of retailers and manufacturers are already flagging the

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wholegrain provision of their products, especially in the breakfast cereal category.

The bedrock of provision of robust information about the nutritional contribution and value of foods are food composition databases (FCDBs) such as the McCance and Widdowson tables in the UK and the Souci-Fachmann-Kraut tables available in Germany. A conference focusing on this important but overlooked topic was held in London at the end of February, a report of which will appear in the next issue of *Nutrition Bulletin*. Tables and databases on the composition of food provide detailed information that is essential for nutrition labelling of foods, investigating trends and associations between nutrients and disease risk, and for identifying nutrition problems and for shaping healthy eating messages. Food composition data are also essential in dealing with food safety issues and product innovation. Yet, currently, there is no harmonised and standardised European food composition database, and many databases in use are incomplete or out of date.

Delegates heard about progress to date with the central objective of the EuroFIR project – to develop and integrate a comprehensive, coherent and validated databank providing a single, authoritative source of food composition data for Europe. They also heard from users of FCDBs about the crucial importance of datasets that are compatible across Europe for European studies such as the EPIC study on diet and cancer, and how such data are used by the food industry in both product labelling and new product innovation. News of

the work on bioactive plant-derived substances and on collating nutrient information on traditional foods consumed across Europe was also provided. A paper on the history of FCDBs can be found in *Nutrition Bulletin* (Church 2006), and the website (<http://www.Eurofir.net>) provides information on the ongoing work in the form of reports, papers and newsletters. The most recent report (Williamson 2006) addresses the different uses of FCDBs in Europe, e.g. within clinical settings, epidemiological research, public health and education, the food industry and the food service industry. The report also discusses limitations of current databases and potential future developments.

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