

Book Review

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The Ceylon Journal of Medical Science 1997; 40: 29-30

Food and Nutrition

by T. W. Wikramanayake

Publisher: Hector Kobbekaduwa Agrarian Research & Training Institute, Wijerama Mawatha, Colombo 7. 1996. pp xv + 396 A4 size. Rs 400, USD 25.

This is the third edition of a book by Professor Wikramanayake, doyen of nutrition specialists in Sri Lanka, which started with **Foods and Diets** in 1980 and went into a second edition as **Food and Nutrition** in 1987.

Any reader wishes to feel assured that the author is knowledgeable and reliable. The present work is satisfying in both respects; the reader is sure to feel that he/she is in good hands even in so contentious a field as nutrition. The author has even taken the trouble to provide a list of references to the literature at the end of most chapters, and they include a number of Sri Lankan works.

The scope of the book is wide. There are 28 chapters including a section on gut gases (though placed inappropriately in the chapter on dietary fibre). There is a whole chapter each on "Spices, condiments and the betel chew", "Diet and atherosclerosis", "Obesity and diabetes mellitus" and "Food beliefs and practices" (which includes a section on the "hot-cold theory"). The final chapter is on "Food composition data".

Given this feast, my expectations were raised high, perhaps unduly so. This matter is affected by the question whether a book of this sort, which is addressed to professionals and would-be professionals in the field of health care, should concern itself not only with facts but also with issues. Let me mention, for example, a few

issues which I consider to be important in Sri Lanka today, and ask whether the author deals with them.

Issue no. 1: Vegetarianism. Should be promoted further, even though the bulk of the people's diet has been and is rice and vegetables. The author answers this on the Yes side ("achieve nutritional improvement by an adequate combination of cereals with other locally available or producible foods such as legumes and leafy vegetables, with a minimum of foods of animal origin" (p. xi). The book has a section on vegetarian diets (pp 179-182) (which starts with the sentence "Vegetarianism has been practised in South Asia from ancient times"). Due distinction is drawn between vegans and lacto-vegetarians, and attention is drawn to the deficiencies of a vegan diet.

Issue no. 2: Rice vs bread. Should we not move away from dependence on imported food, especially wheat, towards locally-produced food, especially rice and other sources of starch? Answer: Yes, and "a fairly good loaf can be produced" by adding flour of rice, maize, millet, pulses and manioc" (p. 155).

Issue no. 3: Cheap sample diet. While it would go far beyond the province of the nutritionist to prescribe solutions for the high degree of malnutrition that occurs in the poorer sections of the population, would the nutritionist prescribe a feasible, cheap but nutritious sample diet for them? Answer: The book itself does not give such a sample diet, but it gives more general guidance for improving poor people's diets (e.g. enrich foods with flour from pulses, increase the frequency of meals, increase the consumption of fats and oils) (p. 279).

Issue no. 4: Self-restraint. For those who have money to buy more than enough food, is there a

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general rule for them to eat so as to keep well? Answer: The author gives no straight answer to such a question, but I suspect that the tone of the book suggests some broad generalisation like the following: eat less than you wish to at each meal, include plenty of vegetables and fruits in the diet, and reduce the eating of fatty foods, sugary foods and salty foods. Thus the author cites a WHO recommendation for the reduction of the incidence of coronary heart disease: "Reduce the energy density of the diet by consuming more low-fat, low-sugar foods" (p. 331).

Issue no. 5: Successes and failures. Would it be useful to have an analysis of cases of success and of failure in nutrition programmes and projects? Answer: The author himself cites the case of "triposha": "more than 15 years of triposha (containing soya flour, maize and a vitamin-mineral mixture) in Sri Lanka has had little impact on the incidence of undernutrition" (p. 279). What went wrong? If the author does not answer this question, he gives an alternative approach on the same page. The author stresses that action should be taken on a very broad front. Planners must realise this and co-ordinate the efforts of all ministries and departments. I should add that a book on Food & Nutrition, meant primarily for students of nutrition, both

young and old, and health professionals, both family physicians and consultants, cannot be expected to make statements on policy. Such statements are to be found in policy documents produced by the Ministry of Policy Planning, in the formulation of which the author has played a part. The author has shown the need for examining nutritional problems from the point of view of biochemistry, physiology and genetics, and the need for counteracting "bad" genes by adjusting the internal environment through foods and diets.

The book is attractively produced in a two-column format. It would have been useful to the reader if there were a running headline giving the chapter heading on each page. The cover is decorated with a drawing which itself is drawn from a number of Lankan temple wall paintings depicting food and beverages.

The book is a landmark publication in the field of Lankan nutritional science. P S Shetty, Professor & Head, Human Nutrition Unit, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, has written the foreword full of praise for the work, and adding that "It is indeed a pity that a book such as this is not being published and made available to reach a wider audience in South East Asia".