

March blog

Geoffrey Cannon



You'll be wanting to know about my picture, above. The artist is J Borges, the great Pernambucan artisan whose one-man show was held at the folklore museum next to the old presidential palace in the Catete district of Rio de Janeiro late last year. The young hero-cum-saint is Santo Expedito, who has a special place in the hearts and souls of Brazilians. Are you in an impossible situation? Sure that your life cannot come right? Beset with ruin and rheumatism, dependent relatives, doom, disaster, credit crunch and climate change? Say a little prayer to Santo Expedito, the all-purpose *ex voto*, and provided you really and truly do have faith, all will be well. That's me! I often start my conference presentations with this image and such thoughts for these hard times.

Public health nutrition

The vision of José Maria



This regular column, or blog in the cyber-vernacular, will touch on a number of recurring themes, which I also sometimes mention in my longer oral presentations. The plan is to range wide and at the same time try to make all the points relevant to the current – and future – teaching and practice of public health nutrition.

To begin with, here follows the vision of José Maria Bengoa, often seen as the founder of our discipline as from the 1940s, who grew up in Bilbao, lived and worked for many years in exile in Venezuela, and who died on 16 January this year age 96. You are referred to a heartfelt obituary by his countryman and Association council member Lluís Serra-Majem, found by googling 'José Maria Bengoa'.

By the way, why are great nutrition scientists unknown and invisible to educated people outside our trade, unlike say zoologists, astronomers or ecologists? This is a theme to which I will return. Meanwhile, I commend the vivid Association members' profiles on this website.

The picture above was taken on the occasion of the first world congress of public health nutrition in Barcelona in 2006. José Maria said then: 'One can glimpse a great expansion in the horizons of the science of nutrition. The limited area that we had grown accustomed to is expanding. We are getting closer and closer, like a great magic wheel, to the ideas that the Greeks held about dietetics – as the dominion of

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Geoffrey Cannon

The need for prayer, José Maria Bengoa.
The cult of individualism, Rudolf Virchow.
Referencing, why? The joy of blogging.
What happened to *Out of the Box* ✨

The next big one

II World Congress on
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NEW MONTHLY BLOG



Fabio Gomes

The big heat in Rio. Pineapples.
Policies to prevent cancer in Brazil.

life itself, both in the biological and social sense. It seems as if we are redefining nutrition as the beginning and end of life itself’.

This inspiring statement is also challenging. It does not imply rejection of the accomplishments of nutrition science in the ‘modern age’ since the time of Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier and Justus von Liebig. It does perceive nutrition as an integral part of the natural philosophy and practice of life well led, as dietetics was for thousands of years. Nutrition seen from the biochemical point of view is just one part of this much greater whole. By analogy, study and understanding of stress physics, and of the molecular properties of concrete and steel, enables architects to design and engineers to build taller buildings and longer bridges; but there is more to architecture and engineering than their underpinning technologies, necessary though these are.

Ideology

The fallacy of individualism

This brings me to José Maria’s mention of society. In *On Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville points out that individualism as a mass ideology first became the basis of everyday thinking and attitudes in the post-revolutionary USA. This followed the rise of the notion of spiritual and economic individual supremacy and the inviolability of personal property for the elect and the elite, which, as RH Tawney shows, is the basis of Protestantism and also a cause and a consequence of capitalism.

When individualism becomes everyday, de Tocqueville says that all classes of people are ‘constantly circling round in the pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each of them, withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest’. And writing in those days when the masculine encompassed the feminine, he went on: ‘Mankind, for him, consists of his family and his personal friends. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing. He exists in and for himself’. Thus, in Margaret Thatcher’s phrase, ‘there is no such thing as society’. Or in Tony Blair’s even more telling phrase, made with reference to the source of his votes, funds and power as UK prime minister, ‘all of us’ is ‘individuals, companies, and Government’. (Yes, he really did say this: google [‘Tony Blair on healthy living 26 July 2006’](#)).

This ideology is now so pervasive in those countries that dominate most of the world politically, economically and culturally, that we may hardly notice how strange it is, just as fish are unaware of the water within which they swim. Mass individualism explains more than Big Brother. It also explains why the second dominant force on nutrition as conceived and practiced, together with biochemistry, is medicine – or to be more precise, allopathic medicine, meaning the clinical diagnosis and treatment of diseases after these have emerged in individuals and also sometimes in families.

On this point Denis Burkitt, best known as the evangelist for dietary fibre, had a slide which he often showed and dwelt on during his missionary presentations all over the world. On the topic of epidemic diseases, it shows a bunch of folk in white coats in a flooded room, rushing around with mops and pails. Above them is an open tap out of which the water gushes. Denis, a courteous man, and a distinguished surgeon by trade, elected FRS as the discoverer of Burkitt’s lymphoma, always emphasised that mopping is necessary. But he also said that the main job is to turn off the tap. This means responding to the biological and behavioural causes of diseases, but paying most attention to their social and also economic, political and environmental causes and remedies.

Teaching and practice

Who we can trust



As soon as we see this, we cease to be individualists. We also can begin to see that public health nutrition is not merely the scaling up of clinical nutrition from individuals to populations, as almost all current research implies. And this, in my own presentations, usually brings me to the German pathologist and founding father of

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epidemiology Rudolf Virchow. Here he is, above. As a young man of 28, in his 1848 report on what needed to be done after the outbreak of typhus in Upper Silesia, he said: 'It is no longer a question of treating the patient with drugs or by the regulation of food, clothing or housing... With one million people, palliatives will no longer do... We must begin to promote the advancement of the entire population'. In coining the term 'social medicine' he saw public health as an expression of politics, and epidemic disease as a symptom and manifestation of a sick society.

This perception, which surely is correct, is exceptionally challenging. It does not mean that nutritionists of any stripe should toss their textbooks, learned journals and academic curricula in the trash, any more than architects and engineers can afford to know nothing about the breaking point of girders (at least, they need to know somebody who does). But it does imply a very broad approach, a radical rethink of the nature of our trade, and at least a good general understanding of what the British epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose, still looking through a medical prism, terms 'the causes of the causes' of disease – and indeed of health and well-being. This engages us as citizens, a concept which in itself questions individualism. It encourages us to think about what went before and what may come after our own lifetimes, and when, how and why. It also reminds us that we humans are not alone.

In revolutionising our thinking, it also shifts our reading and our ways to study. Thus I used to suppose that my own required reading included monthly – or now even fortnightly – trawls through nutrition science journals. But do city planners pore over papers on say, the use of pulverised soft drink cans rummaged from landfill to raise the melting point of tarmac in downtown Scranton? Do they ponder results correlating the incidence of tyre repair shops and the depth of potholes on five randomly selected country roads in Mato Grosso 1990-1995? Relevant and even generally applicable though such studies might be, I think this is not likely. Now, I give such reading a low priority, and instead encourage students and young professionals to study books that are based on ideas. Examples are Robert Fogel's *The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death, 1700-2100* (don't you love that last word), or Peter Gluckman and Mark Hanson's *The Fetal Matrix* or, to take a really provocative example, Gary Taubes's *Good Calories, Bad Calories*.

But this is only a beginning, for those of us who want to get a grip on public health nutrition in the world we live in now. This, for almost all of us, is very different from the world in which we grew up, learned our trade, took our knocks, and made our assumptions and first impressions.

In my oral presentations I also often list writers and thinkers who are not nutritionists, but whose work has profound implications for us. Other reasons to do this are courtesy and respect, and to indicate where I am coming from; for objectivity in nutrition, as in all sciences, is a crock at the end of the rainbow. Influences on me include (a dozen living authors for starters, not in order): Tim Flannery, Paul Farmer, Tony McMichael, Colin Tudge, Amartya Sen, Susan George, Paul Ehrlich, Manuel Castells, Lynn Margulis, Mike Davis, Michael Pollan, and yes, Francis Moore Lappé (1-12). Which books? Any or all, and do not assume that the most recent books are therefore superior.



Also, I remain committed to the New Nutrition Science multi-dimensional framework, in which progress is not represented by a straight line but by a spiral by which, when things go well, we emerge above and beyond the place where we were before, more enlightened and enlarged. Thus the fossil shell that is shown here, photographed in Melbourne's Museum of Natural History. Expect more spirals!

Referencing

What and who for?

This brings me to referencing. Having been trained in referencing, as a regular contributor to learned journals whose conventions, apparently designed to keep respectable publishers in their comfort zone, can get a bit close to the cat(13) sat(14)

on the mat(15). I now wonder about referencing, at least of the type that takes the form of long lists of papers at the end of papers. Yes, some such are necessary, though far less useful than hotlinks within the text of electronically published papers. But many seem to be peacock displays of the previous work of the authors, together with deference to other authors – who may be peer reviewers – overall designed to show that while the paper is derivative, it is also original. Ah! Originality! As with the shibboleth of anonymous external peer review, expect a riff on this in a future column.

This is a time when we need fewer facts and more ideas. Data will not do our thinking for us. There is certainly no need to reference the books mentioned here. Google them! Look them up on Amazon. Practically anything written by (1-12) includes insights into public health nutrition. Try for a start Mike Davis's *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* or come to that his more recent *Planet of Slums* both published by Verso.

Electronic publication

The beginning of a new age

Those of you who read the admirable monthly journal *Public Health Nutrition* will be aware that my 'Out of the Box' column, which appeared in every issue as from the beginning of 2003, ceased with the September 2009 issue. As chronic diseases are said to be, and as crimes often are, the causes of the end of *OOTB* were multi-factorial. My auto-obituary published in the October issue of *PHN* said that 65 columns over seven years was a long run – true – and that I intended to spend more time with my family – better had! But the whole truth and nothing but the truth, including the more intriguing reasons, has not been disclosed, following an exchange of courteous and discreet emails with the estimable Ian Macdonald, who as current president of the (UK) Nutrition Society is the owner of *PHN*. Let's just say that here I am again.

So is this column here, the new *OOTB*? In some ways inevitably yes. *Sou eu*, as we say in Brazil – 'this is me'. And yes, it will include news and views, names and times, thoughts and jokes. If you think or know I am wrong in anything I write, say so below. If you want systematically different takes from mine to be published, say so below, with proposals. Electronic publishing is wonderful, there's room for us all.

Also, unlike columns published in old-style print journals, electronic contributions can be up to date – indeed, bang up to date. For example, just as some newspaper websites publish ball-by-ball and dive-by-dive commentaries on cricket and football matches updated every minute, as well as reviews published after the event, a blog could take the form of a slide-by-slide commentary on selected conference presentations which you, with your laptop connected to wi-fi, could read, and respond to, at the same time. You could do this sitting next to the blogger, or from somewhere else in the conference, or – and here we are getting really interesting – from anywhere in the world. Indeed, presenters could join in, during the discussion period or even, with a second laptop open and connected beside them, during the presentation itself. The possibilities are endless. For some while though, in common with the other contributions to the Association website, this column will appear monthly.

Since late last summer, after writing what turned out to be the final *OOTB*, I have been listening to advice. Association President Barrie Margetts hopes to read more reasons to be cheerful. John Waterlow, the sage of Hillgate Street, prefers gossip to attempts to be scholarly. Agneta Yngve, the editor-in-chief of *PHN*, wants more credit given to women (not just here, everywhere). Claus Leitzmann, my comrade in the *New Nutrition Science project*, suggests avoidance of sentences beginning with the personal pronoun. My colleague Carlos Monteiro points out that some of my sentences are too long. A number of people who may prefer not to be named think I should not be so beastly about transnational food and drink manufacturers and their satraps, and maybe they have a point too. What do you think? Please respond below.

On another point I am impenitent. Some critics of *OOTB* felt it should have been 'balanced', meaning that whenever I touch on controversial topics – is truth anything other than the consensual wisdom of the currently dominant group of nutrition scientists? – I should always indicate both or all points of view. This misunderstands the purpose of a column, or blog, or indeed any editorial view. Yes, opinions should have a defensible basis. Yes, ideas for which there is as yet little or no evidence, or which by their nature cannot be researched, are usually best identified as such. Absolutely, mistakes should be corrected. But balance, when this is needed, should be supplied by other writers, in response, or in their own contributions. Plus, give me a break! And now over to you.

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References

1. Tim Flannery
2. Paul Farmer
3. Tony McMichael
4. Colin Tudge
5. Amartya Sen
6. Susan George
7. Paul Ehrlich
8. Manuel Castells
9. Lynn Margulis
10. Mike Davis
11. Michael Pollan
12. Francis Moore Lappé

Your responses, comments or queries of any length are warmly welcomed.

[Please click here.](#)

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