

WN Columns

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What do you think?

Geoffrey Cannon



Sao Paulo. One great victory has been won for nutrition recently, in these last decades, and is repeatedly confirmed as won. It is this. Everybody knows that undernutrition and starvation is caused by deficiency of dietary energy – of food. But what causes deficiency of food? This is an old story. For almost two centuries, it's been well-known that diets high in protein that are generally energy-dense, promote human growth, and this discovery gave the profession of nutrition its first big boost. But growth for what? This is not the victory I refer to. For more or less a century now, pretty much everybody knows that a series of diseases, some rare, some believed to be common, are caused by deficiency of nutrients, singly or in combination. Hence the term 'nutritional deficiency diseases'. This was the second boost for a profession whose practitioners began to call themselves 'nutritionists'. But why are populations short of nutrients? This is also not the recent victory.

Nutrition rules

It is this. The victory for nutrition in the last half-century, since the 1980s, and now in the 2000s, is confirmed by incessant media headlines, United Nations declarations, national government calls to action, blizzards of expert reports, and exponential multiplication of learned journals and what goes with them. It is the now certain knowledge that most of the great debilitating, disabling and deadly disorders and diseases of our era, are caused by faulty nutrition. Obesity, diabetes, high blood

pressure, stroke, heart disease, various cancers, and ‘master diseases’ like the metabolic syndrome, and more, and more, including mental conditions, are all agreed, believed or suspected to be nutritional. The question here of course, is why all of a sudden are populations consuming such quantities of the food that makes them sick? Meanwhile though, even the purveyors of the products whose constant consumption is the direct cause of these maladies now advertise their ‘better for you’ and ‘good for you’ formulations as if these are delicious medicine.

There is though, a great difference between this victory for nutrition, and the victories associated with the names of Justus von Liebig and Elmer McCollum and the other giants of their times. It is this. In the past, the leaders of what became modern nutrition science, in alliance with governments, acted on their discoveries and beliefs. The results have changed the standards for the shape and size of the human species, and have more or less eliminated deficiency diseases in more fortunate populations. These victories for nutrition science were also victories for the profession of nutrition (1).

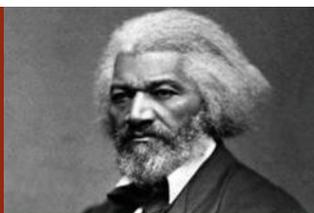
Leaders of nutrition in the past knew how to change the world, and were believed. When von Liebig came to Britain, initially in the 1840s, with increasingly colossal plans to transform food, agriculture and public health, he was honoured at the highest tables and on great public occasions (2). A century later, as Philip James will recall in his ‘As I see it’ column next month, John Boyd Orr’s plans in the 1930s to transform population health (3) were championed in Parliament by a future prime minister, and became the cornerstone of British wartime food policy.

Where are the nutritionists?

Whereas, now... A defining characteristic of obesity, and of diabetes in the form closely related to obesity, is that especially in the global South, these epidemics are out of control, with no end in sight (4). Projections of their incidence most of all in countries like China and India, look like projections of global warming, population increase, air pollution, forced migration, fish extinction, polar melting, or energy depletion, indicating gloom and even doom. Nutritionists tend to be anxious not to be identified as such, at parties. They are liable either be asked for tips to reduce weight, or else why there is no end to world hunger, or else why the world is getting fat. It is no fun being asked questions to which you have no plausible answers.

This column proposes an answer, as the latest in my series ‘What I believe’, all of which can be accessed in pdf form below. In general, with vitally important exceptions, nutrition professionals have lost the plot, and for a specific easy to identify reason. As a profession, in general nutrition is docile. This is a great error. This is no time for lambs. This of course is a crucial reason for the foundation and rise of public health nutrition. In these days, as in the 1840s and 1940s, we need

lions. We should not assume that inspiration will come only from inside the profession of nutrition. Public health nutrition is part of the profession of public health, which is concerned with public policy and therefore is political. It follows that we can learn from great social reformers. And thus, in a slide I often show, I offer the great US emancipator, a man who pushed Abraham Lincoln to make the end of slavery the overarching purpose of the Civil War: Frederick Douglass (5).



The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions made have been born of earnest struggle. Those who profess to love freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are those who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the mighty roar of its many waters

Frederick Douglass, 1818-1895

Notes and reference

- 1 Perhaps significantly, 'nutritionist' was not a term nor much used in those days. The founders of the UK Nutrition Society in 1941 identified themselves as biochemists, physiologists, physicians, and such-like, never as nutritionists.
- 2 Brock W. Liebig and the British. [Chapter 4]. In: *Justus von Liebig. The Chemical Gatekeeper*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. During his 1844 British tour a great dinner for 300 was held in his honour in Glasgow, and he received the freedom of the city. He wrote to a friend 'When one is showered with honours the result is a Falstaffian belly; I've been stuffed to bursting point'.
- 3 Orr J. *Food Health and Income. Report on a Survey of Adequacy of Diet in Relation to Income*. London: Macmillan, 1936. Second and revised edition, 1937.
- 4 Already by the 1970s obesity was booming, as attested by introductory remarks in a 510 page hardback volume publishing papers from the second International Congress on Obesity held in Washington DC. 'In 1977-78, the study of obesity is alive and thriving. The chapters in this volume attest to this fact and promise a bright and rewarding future for research in this area'. Bray G. Preface. In: Bray G (ed). *Recent Advances in Obesity Research*. London: Newman, 1978.
- 5 Frederick Douglass's wikipedia entry is particularly good. An escaped slave in his early life, he also had a sense of humour. His first wife was black. After she died he married a white woman. His answer to fierce criticism, was that since his mother was black, and his father (the slave-owner) was white, this to him seemed logical.

Food and nutrition, health and well-being **What I believe. The series: 6**

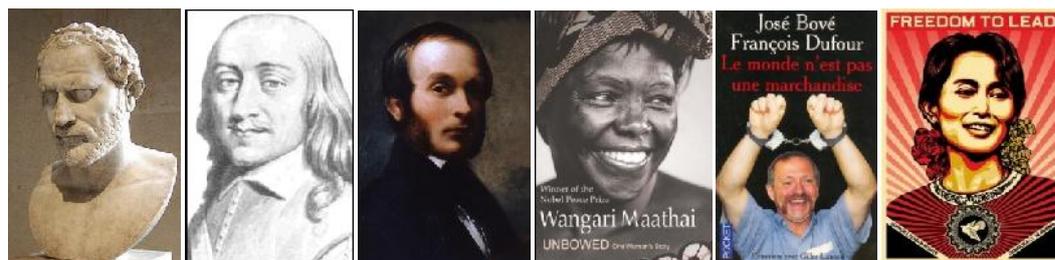
[Access February 2013 column on ideas and nourishment here](#)

[Access March 2013 column on the whole of nutrition and best being small here](#)

[Access April 2013 WN column on nutrition as part of dietetics here](#)

In this series of 'what I believe', I riff each month on key topics. The columns including are accessed above. In February I stated my belief that 'in the beginning is the idea'. It is not facts (quantity) but ideas (quality) that come first. In February I also stated that we should not think *nutrition* so much as *nourishment*, and engage with health and well-being in their physical and also their mental, emotional and spiritual aspects. In March I celebrated nutrition in its social, economic and environmental as well as biological dimensions (as symbolised by the spiral images that introduce my current columns) and made the case for 'It is best to be small'. Last month I explained that as now taught and practiced, nutrition it is an attenuated and narrowed descendant of dietetics, which originally was and should be the natural philosophy of the good life well led. This month is about my belief in the need to be active or, to be blunt, the need to agitate, as professionals and as citizens.

Policy and politics **Agitate!**



Speak, write, so as to act! Left to right: Demosthenes, Thomas Rainsborough, John Snow; and in our time Wangari Maathai, José Bové, Aung San Suu Kyi

[Access November 2011 WN editorial on Wangari Maathai here](#)

[Access November 2011 WN celebrations of the life of Wangari Maathai here](#)

[Access February 2013 WN editorial on activism and José Bové here](#)

[Access February 2013 WN account of La Via Campesina here](#)

You will get a good idea of my theme for this month from the pictures of historic and modern activists shown above, and I say more about their significance below.

Cannon G. Food and nutrition, health and well-being. What I believe: 6.

Agitate! [What do you think?] *World Nutrition* May 2013, 4,5, 296-311

Obama's hesitation

First though, three points related directly to public health nutrition. It is likely that President Barack Obama is all for a tax on soda (sweetened carbonated soft drinks) but, as chronicled by Marion Nestle this month, has decided to do nothing about this. Why, is because he does not sense any prospect of a powerful enough popular movement. He is rumoured to have responded to some seeker after change, in conversation, by saying something like 'you people don't seem to care enough about this issue'. After all, he has enough to worry about, without being the White House Icarus whose public health proposals all go down in flames when put to elected representatives who are supported or pressed by the soda manufacturers and bottlers and their public affairs wizards.

Boyd Orr's fury

The second point was made by John Boyd Orr, in the second 1937 edition of his *Food Health and Income*, referenced above, the blueprint for reformation of British public health nutrition at that time. The findings and recommendations of the 1936 edition had been referred to the government's official Advisory Committee on Nutrition, which in turn had appointed a Statistical Sub-Committee to, as Boyd Orr related, 'report on the adequacy of the data and the degree of probability attached to the estimates of food consumption'. It seemed that the Statistical Sub-Committee was concerned with 'the inadequacy of the data'.

There is reliable testimony from those who knew him, that Boyd Orr boiled with rage. He knew as a medical officer who served in the 1914-1918 trenches with two medals for bravery, that the next war, which came two years later in 1939, would be lost or won on the home front. All depended on workers and parents as well as soldiers and auxiliaries being decently fed. So he raised the rhetorical temperature. In reply to doubters and carpers he told it like it was, as founding director of the Rowett Research Institute in north Scotland, also dedicated to animal health: 'If children... were reared for profit like young farm stock, giving them a diet below requirements for health would be financially unsound. Unfortunately, the health and physical fitness of the rising generation are not marketable commodities which can be assessed in terms of money'.

He also went public. After making the rather barbed statement that reform of agriculture and food policy 'will require economic statesmanship of the highest order', he continued by stating for his time, what Barack and also Michelle Obama know now. 'In a democratic country, the necessary legislation must be preceded by an intelligent demand on the part of the people.. What is most urgently needed, is that the general public should realise the extent to which health and physique can be improved by better feeding'.

Today's killer diet

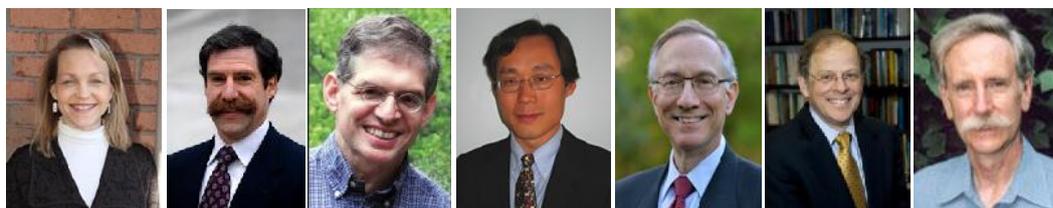
Third and also to the same point of the nature, purpose and responsibilities of practitioners of nutrition, is the lead story in the Updates section of this issue of *WN*. [You can access it with its references here.](#) Below I paraphrase it.

MailOnline

Wednesday, Apr 17 2013

The Western diet really IS a killer: People who eat white bread, butter and red meat are most likely to die young

The headline is from the UK *Daily Mail*, which has a mass readership of around 6 million, with a powerful website. The 'killer diet' is the typical UK diet, which the authors of the study from University College, London, say is 'characterized by high intakes of fried and sweet food, processed food and red meat, refined grains, and high-fat dairy products', or as a 'processed food' diet.



Some of the Harvard team: Marjorie McCullough, Meir Stampfer, Edward Giovannucci, Frank Hu, David Hunter, Graham Colditz, and Walter Willett

But there is more! The UCL study confirms the findings of a Harvard School of Public Health team, some pictured above, which was published a whole decade ago. For health the diet they devised and studied also over a period of years, emphasises fresh and minimally processed foods and ingredients, whole grains and lightly processed oils, and minimises red meat, processed meat and processed products generally – the reverse of the typical UK – and US- diet. It 'predicted lower incidence of major chronic disease in men and women and was related to important reductions in cardiovascular disease risk'.

Commenting, Carlos Monteiro, co-ordinator of the Food System project regularly published in *WN*, says: 'Our colleagues at Harvard confirm that processed and ultra-processed meat products are particularly unhealthy, and like us are appalled by high consumption of sweet soft drinks, which are also ultra-processed, being formulations solely of industrial ingredients'.

So what are public health professionals waiting for? Why are they not, like Boyd Orr, passionately infuriated by the tactics of ‘free market’ governments that give transnational ultra-processed product manufacturers a ‘free hand’? Why, with vital and inspiring exceptions of which Walter Willett (pictured above) and Philip James (*see his column this month*) are two, has the profession of nutrition become so limp? As John Waterlow once said, in a somewhat similar context, I can think of a number of reasons for this, but I cannot think of a good one.

The meaning of action

What I believe, is that population nutrition, and public health generally, is in general liable to get worse, unless and until a critical number of professionals get and stay active. Writing – like this here – has its value, and so does research, but these are not what I mean by action. They are necessary but not sufficient for progress. Writing in itself is not action. Nor is speaking unless, like that of Marion Nestle, it moves hearts and minds. Action as I mean it here, implies commitment, in writing and speaking, but crucially also in doing. Yes, I mean what leaders of movements prepared when necessary to stand against bad laws, call ‘direct action’. This by definition involves personal and professional risk.

Demosthenes of Athens (384-322 BCE)

Please scroll up to the faces of the activists who introduce this section. Not of the colleagues from Harvard, the strip of pictures above them. First on the left is Demosthenes, who learned oratory by speaking with pebbles in his mouth, and by shouting over the roar of waves. He opposed the threat to Athens of Macedon all his adult life, knew that he risked death by doing so, and eventually evaded state murder by suicide. There are many people in the world today as knowingly courageous as he, but few in high-income countries.

Thomas Rainsborough (1610-1648)

The reason the title of this column includes the call ‘Agitate!’ is because of men like Colonel Thomas Rainsborough, a high-born leading officer in the English Civil Wars, and the leader of the Levellers in the Parliament that eventually acceded to the execution of King Charles I. He was one of the original ‘agitators’. The term originally had a precise and positive meaning. It was used to identify admirable men who were also outstanding speakers in Cromwell’s New Model Army. Their task was to educate and inspire common soldiers with the idea of democracy and the supremacy of elected representatives over the tyranny of monarchs. Rainsborough and other brave thinkers and doers got fairly close to creating the first socialist state. He was assassinated by Royalists.

John Snow (1813-1858)

Rudolf Virchow (1821-1902)



In case you think this is all straying a long way from public health, here are two founders of modern epidemiology, with depictions of them in action. John Snow, who was 200 last month, is forever known as the medical man who traced the map of cholera in Soho, and refused to accept the hesitations and prevarications of local politicians and directors of and shareholders in private water companies. As shown rather imaginatively above (left) he then in 1854 ordered the removal of the handle of the pump in Broad Street (now Broadwick Street). This worked.

Apologies for repeating again in this column that Rudolf Virchow (not in the strip of pictures) commissioned at the age of 27 as an outstanding pathologist to determine the causes of a rampant outbreak of typhus in Upper Silesia, declared in his 1848 report that the reason was poverty, itself caused by injustice, was fired by the Prussian authorities, and then served on the Berlin barricades during the European Revolution, protecting workers against soldiers. The revolutionary flag seen in the picture above (right), is now the flag of Republican Germany.

Wangari Maathai (1940-2011)

We told her story in *WN* in November 2011: the links are above, and that to our celebration of her life and work, is also here. She realised that sustainable rural livelihoods in her country of Kenya were impossible without tree cover, and formed the Green Belt women's movement to plant millions of trees. Beaten up and imprisoned by the police and bullies hired at the time of a particularly corrupt Kenyan regime who wanted to clear land for golf course and hotels, she became an MP, won a Nobel Peace Prize, and got visiting US senator Barack Obama to plant a tree. When her husband Mwangi Mathai divorced her in the late 1970s his lawyers demanded that she changed her name. She added an 'a'.

José Bové (1953 -)

We told some of his story in *WN* in February this year: the links are above, and that [*to our editorial*](#) is here. As with Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt movement, he is

an outstanding example of public health nutrition agitation, because as well as being a charismatic character, and a showman (see the picture taken after an arrest) he is leader of a social movement, La Via Campesina. Famous as the cheese farmer who trashed a McDonald's, he has been imprisoned three times and is now a member of the European parliament.

Aung San Suu Kyi (1945 -)

Leader of the movement for a democratic government of Myanmar (Burma). Her father, founder of the Burmese army, negotiated national independence from the British in 1947, and was then assassinated. In 1988 she parted from her British husband and their children to resume political life. In 1990 her party gained a majority which, if upheld, would have made her prime minister, but she already was under house arrest. She was released after 22 years in 2011. 'Governments are amazing' she once said. 'So often they are the last to know what the people want'.

There is hope

Writing about these eight agitators now, I see that one was assassinated, one suicided, and all but one were imprisoned, of whom two knew they might be murdered. All, as a defining characteristic of agitation, put their reputation, their work and their lives on the line. That's what it takes. Less dramatically, Justus von Liebig and John Boyd Orr also constantly risked much if not all, in pursuance of their beliefs and visions.

Where are their successors now? I thought about this when in Chile in October 2011. 'Pay no attention. They're the Food Taliban'. This was whispered by her advisor to the First Lady of Chile, Cecilia Morel, wife of president Sebastián Piñera, as reported by a Chilean colleague. The place was Valparaiso, and the occasion the conference on prevention of obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases in the Americas, convened by Guido Girardi, then president of the Chilean senate, held in a packed grand Senate chamber over which not so long ago Augusto Pinochet had presided.

Cecilia Castillo

Speakers included Pekka Puska, Ricardo Uauy, Juan Rivera, Enrique Jacoby, Robert Lustig and myself. The whisper was not I think about us. It certainly did not refer to fellow speakers Woods Staton from McDonald or Diego Cifone from PepsiCo, who positioned their corporations as part of the solution. It followed powerful presentations by Guido Girardi, Philip James and Cecilia Castillo, all of whom advocate 'traffic light' nutrition labelling with its implication that some products are better consumed only occasionally and others – pre-prepared burgers and sweetened soft drinks, for example – seldom and even maybe never.



First Lady of Chile Cecilia Morel leads the national healthy living campaign. Like First Lady of the US Michelle Obama, here she is doing physical jerks.

This is not the position of *Elige Vivir Sano* ('choose healthy living'). This is the Chilean public-private partnership that focuses on the consumer, includes general education, promotes physical activity, and leaves product formulation to industry. Cecilia Morel is its patron, and here she is above, using bottles of water as dumbbells. Standard damage limitation advice given to clients by public relations wizards includes, when the game is going badly for you, don't kick the ball, kick the man'. Or in Cecilia Castillo's case, the woman. Hence the 'Taliban' whisper. Cecilia is an agitator. Moderate reformers in Chile know that they need her, and have told me so.

Patti Rundall



Mexico is mounting its anti-hunger campaign. Mexico's president (left) has done deals with Pepsi-Co and Nestlé (right) to make the campaign profitable

Similarly, the global movement for breastfeeding, and all its supporters and sympathisers and supporters in UN agencies, national governments, academia and general public interest organisations, know that they need agitation from the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action, the International Baby Food Action Network, and its legions of agitators. Again I single out Patti Rundall, now IBFAN co-chair, as the champion I have known and worked with for 25 years now. ('Gosh' I hear Patti say, genuinely warm, friendly and a bit scatty, and a razor-focused campaigner. 'Is it really that long, Geoffrey?')

Her current story is easily told by simply quoting a *British Medical Journal* leading article of 16 April. *BMJ* 2013; 346 doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.f2458>. This is based on an IBFAN media release which, if you look, you will find used as the basis for lead media stories all over the world. Also see the Association's home page for a full and updated account. This is Patti's doing.

Box 2

Nestle and PepsiCo do the business in Mexico

This is an edited version of the BMJ signed leader. Campaigners have warned that a project to reduce hunger in Mexico is being hijacked by food multinationals such as Nestlé and PepsiCo, which have signed agreements to provide nutritional advice and products to some of the country's poorest women.

Under the agreements Nestlé is to teach 15 000 women in 12 of the country's poorest states how to cook desserts and how to run a small business selling them. The project, called 'My sweet business', will also include half a day of education on nutrition and basic supplies to help the women set up the businesses.

PepsiCo company Quaker is developing a special nutritional milk for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and a high nutrition biscuit for children aged under 5 years who have problems of malnutrition. Walmart, 7 Eleven, and Kmart are also reported to be signing agreements to join the Mexican official National Crusade against Hunger. The Mexican government said that 11 000 people died from malnutrition in 2011 and that a quarter of the country's 115 million people have some kind of nutritional deficiency.

Mexican consumer groups have sounded the alarm over conflicts of interest, and have challenged the government's strategy. One cartoon in the newspaper *La Jornada* pictures the secretary for social development, Rosario Robles (right in the picture above this box) as Marie Antoinette, saying, "Are you hungry? Drink Pepsi."

The International Baby Food Action Network has warned that Nestlé's initiative would 'in effect, subsidize and facilitate the penetration of Nestlé products into the Mexican market, under the perfect cover of philanthropy'. One newspaper reported that under the agreement Nestlé would be allowed to supply all its products to a network of 25 000 government run shops that stock basic food items in rural areas, though the BMJ was not able to confirm this report as it went to press.

Patti Rundall, who co-chairs the network, told the BMJ, 'These partnerships mean the Mexican government is handing over nutritional education and knowledge to the corporations'. International marketing conventions meant that Nestlé should not be in direct contact with mothers, Rundall said. 'These 15 000 women going round selling puddings will be agents for Nestlé', she added. PepsiCo's nutritional milk for mothers could undermine breast feeding by making women think that their milk was not good enough, she said.

Robles has defended the partnerships with multinationals in the Mexican media, saying that they would benefit thousands of people and that the government would have overall control. Nestlé, which describes itself as a 'leading nutrition, health, and wellbeing company', told the *BMJ* that its aim was to help families eat better and said that the women it helped to set up businesses selling desserts would be free to use any brand of ingredients. It did not confirm whether the agreement would also allow the company to reach more people with its own products.

United Nations conventions designed to control aggressive marketing say that food companies selling baby milk and other infant food products should not have direct contact with mothers.

This is a shocking story of a losing war, in the country which together with Chile, is the most open in Latin America to transnational corporation penetration, and which has the worst rates of obesity of any substantial country in the global South. It is also a story of a battle for hearts and minds within the war that is being won. The reason is agitation. There is more to say on this theme, later.

Status

Conflicting or competing interests: I know Philip James, Walter Willett and Marion Nestle, and admire their work and their stance, without necessarily agreeing with everything they say or so. Are these competing interests? Perhaps so. I am committed to the position exemplified by Rudolf Virchow, and often say so. Does this unalterable view make me biased? Maybe so,

Readers may make use of the material in this column if acknowledgement is given to the Association. Please cite as: Cannon G. Food and nutrition, health and well-being. What I believe: 6. Agitate!. *World Nutrition*, May 2013, 4,5, 296-307. Obtainable at www.wphna.org.

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