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Comments and Critique

Diet in the Aetiology of Cancer Editorial Comment

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IN THIS issue are published the conclusions and recommendations of a Task Force on diet, nutrition and cancer convened by the European School of Oncology (pp.207–220). The association between dietary intake and cancer risk is a very topical issue in cancer epidemiology and prevention, and there is so much new data emerging that it is useful to stop and assess what is going on. This is what the Task Force has attempted to do.

The Task Force undertook a complete review of the topic of diet and cancer in the course of their discussions. They present a summary of the associations observed with cancer risk and intake of macronutrients and certain micronutrients, obesity and alcohol. They discuss certain methodological issues in nutritional epidemiology, and conclude with some dietary recommendations. This is an interesting document which should be the basis of important discussions and debate throughout Europe.

Of course, not everyone will agree with all the conclusions reached by this or any other group who set out to review this topic, which is the subject of a great deal of controversy at the present time. There are also important methodological issues which the Task Force do not have the expertise to discuss. In order to enlarge the debate on this topic, the *European Journal of Cancer* invited several other distinguished scientists, some of whom are themselves active in the field of diet and cancer, to prepare short commentaries on the report: these are published directly after the report of the Task Force.

Baghurst makes a plea for the greater incorporation of biological thought and markers into the epidemiological study of diet and cancer. This is increasingly being recognised in certain quarters, and epidemiologists must admit that they increasingly need the input of more basic science in studies of this research area. Forman provides thoughtful advice on the recommendations about stomach cancer, and argues convincingly that there is still work required to clearly indicate whether preserved foods really do cause cancer *per se*, or whether they are markers for overall dietary patterns which are unhealthy. Franceschi reminds us that concentration on macronutrients and micronutrients can focus attention away from potentially

important aspects of eating patterns. It is also worthwhile reminding ourselves that people eat *food* and not simply a variety of sources of nutrients. La Vecchia invites caution in accepting that precise estimates of potential reductions in cancer incidence due to dietary changes can be proposed, particularly when discussing breast cancer, where the findings from case-control and cohort studies appear to be in conflict. Giles and Ireland, like some of the other authors, acknowledge the improvements which have taken place in epidemiological methodology, and make a specific illustration using fibre as to why more progress is still needed.

Skrabanek and McMichael take a more broader view of this whole issue. Skrabanek introduces the slightly cynical view of the worldly-wise academic, pointing out, among other thought-provoking observations, the large number of consensus reports which have been issued on the topic of dietary recommendations. I wonder if there should now be an attempt to bring all the Consensus Committees together to have a *Consensus of the Consensus*. McMichael stands back and raises some very important fundamental questions. Should epidemiological studies continue to treat study subjects as being of equal susceptibility to the effects of dietary exposures (“like sets of genetically identical rodents”)? Should diet and cancer be re-considered within a wider evolutionary framework? I believe that both these commentators have identified a number of important points which should be carefully considered in future discussions of diet and cancer.

The report of the ESO Task Force is timely and useful, and will surely serve as an important basis for discussion and debate throughout Europe, which should result in some actions in the short and medium term. The additional comments of the scientists published here should make everyone think a little more deeply about the whole approach to diet and cancer risk, from basic science through epidemiology and eventually to public health aspects, such as dietary recommendations and interventions. The important topic of diet and cancer will continue to be the subject of much research discussion and debate for the coming years both in the pages of the *European Journal of Cancer* and other similar journals. It is clear that there is a great deal which remains to be done before dietary changes can be made and the outcomes confidently predicted.

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