

## HAHNEMANN AND NUTRITION

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**SYNOPSIS:** Our knowledge of the chemical structure and physiological role of various food factors is only recent. It has been possible to correlate appetite for some particular foods with body needs. We have an in-built mechanism in our body that guides us in the matter of quality and quantity of food we need. This has been proved by many recent scientific experiments. Hahnemann had recognised this fact about two centuries back and had devised methods of ensuring adequate nutrition in health and in disease. Recent evidence confirms the effectiveness of these methods.

### HISTORICAL REVIEW

"The subject of nutrition is as old as man's search for food, but the science of nutrition is newer . . . Man's interest in nutritive values of food began before the dawn of civilization, and it has continued to grow throughout the ages. However, this interest did not develop into a distinct science of nutrition until the twentieth century. We have today a wealth of knowledge about food with fresh concepts and applications."<sup>1</sup>

E. V. McCollum<sup>2</sup> has aptly summarized man's concern for food thus: "Mankind has been on this earth for not less than 300,000 years. For a large share of that time man has been a hunter and a food-gatherer, eating what he could find. Around 6,000 years ago, when the earliest civilizations were being established in a few places, man set forth in earnest as a food-producer to alleviate his ever-pressing need to satisfy hunger. Yet for less than 50 years has man possessed the knowledge that would permit him to provide and then select combinations of foods to nourish his body as it rightfully and properly should be nourished."

Proteins, carbohydrates and fats were studied by Williamson and others from 1850 onwards, working on the theory of types propounded by Laurent and Dumas.<sup>3</sup> The first amino-acid was discovered towards the middle of the last century.<sup>4</sup> Beri-beri was described in Chinese medicine,<sup>5</sup> but it was only in 1897 that Christian Eijkman produced beri-beri experimentally, and cured it by feeding rice-polishings.<sup>6</sup> Scurvy is probably the oldest recognized deficiency disease. The prevention of the disease by the use of fresh foods has been practised for long. In 1772, Captain Cook took a voyage which lasted three years, during which time not one man was lost because of scurvy. This fact he attributed to the use of a 'sweet wort' made from barley and sauerkraut. Subsequently limes or lemons were found to be scurvy preventive.<sup>7</sup> However, scurvy was produced experimentally and then cured only in 1907 by Holst and Frölich.<sup>8</sup>

Vitamin A was recognized, in 1913, by two groups of workers, McCollum & Davis at Johns Hopkins, and Osborne & Mendel at Yale.<sup>9</sup> Rickets has been known as a deficiency disease of infants for centuries. In the early

19th century cod-liver oil was a well-known folk-remedy for rickets in Holland. Later it was accepted as a therapeutic agent for rickets by physicians in Holland, France and Germany. During the later part of the 19th century cod-liver oil lost favour with the medical profession because physicians could not explain its action.<sup>10</sup> Present day concepts of the function of Vitamin D are based upon extensive research on the subject since 1921.<sup>11</sup> The existence of tocopherols was recognized in the early 1920s by Evans. Sure named it vitamin E in 1924.<sup>12</sup> Dam recognized vitamin K in 1935.<sup>13</sup>

From the foregoing lines it is very clear that all that we know today of biochemistry and the physiological role of various food-factors, was discovered only after the death of Hahnemann in 1843.

#### CAFETERIA FEEDING EXPERIMENTS

Organisms need proteins, fats, and carbohydrates. They also need various minerals and vitamins. Lack of one of these substances often creates an appetite for it. Cravings for special foods are well-known under conditions of everyday life. Children whose diet is inadequate often develop a craving for salt and other substances.<sup>14</sup>

Animals living in a state of nature select food in accordance with body needs. This has suggested that the organism does not need scientists to tell it what to eat. Several laboratory experiments have supported this suggestion. Such experiments are often referred to as *Cafeteria feeding experiments*, because, as in a cafeteria, the organism is confronted with a wide variety of foods from which it may select freely.<sup>15</sup>

A cafeteria feeding experiment with fifteen human infants, who selected their own food, over periods ranging from six months to four and a half years, yielded similar results. The results were quite conclusive. All children thrived on a diet of their own choosing. Their growth was in advance of standard growth curves. No bad effects of any kind were noted. The diet chosen was not widely different from that recommended by nutrition experts.<sup>16</sup>

One of the subjects was suffering from rickets. He selected cod-liver oil.<sup>17</sup> These experiments clearly demonstrate that there is an in-built mechanism in animals and in human beings that guides them to take suitable food, in proper amount.

#### HAHNEMANN'S POSITION

Hahnemann's remarks on Cullen's work (1790) sound like a foreshadowing of what we call 'vitamins' today: "Grapes certainly lose important constituents in the process of drying, which are useful to the body."<sup>18</sup> In an essay, in 1792, he wrote: "The risk of scurvy may be avoided by supplying vegetable food, green herbs, fermented legumes and sauerkraut,"<sup>19</sup> and again, in 1797, "A deep-rooted scurvy can often be cured by sauerkraut, cresses and such like vegetables. What would be the use of medicine in such a case?"

To mask the good effects produced by diet."<sup>20</sup>

Thus we find Hahnemann anticipating deficiency diseases. From 1829 onwards he implicated insufficient supply of food as a cause of diseases.<sup>21</sup> He clearly distinguished between food and medicine, when he wrote: "Food is requisite for the healthy body. The pure aliments of food and drink taken until hunger and thirst abate, support our strength, by replacing the parts lost in vital processes, without altering the functions of our organs. Medicines afford no nourishment. They alter body functions."<sup>22</sup>

Much more important than this anticipation of deficiency diseases, and a clear distinction between foods and medicines, which his predecessors lacked, is his recognition of the fact that "an infallible guiding principle directs us in the selection of food and drink."<sup>23</sup> We have already noted that this fact has been amply borne out by cafeteria feeding experiments. He, however, did not stop there, but went a step ahead. He worked out the details of how to put this knowledge into action, to ensure intake of an adequate and balanced diet. Here are cullings from his work:

"One general rule cannot regulate everybody's diet. There are individual differences and differences in the requirements of the same individual at different times. Moderation must be observed and we should be attentive to what best suits our individual constitution in every condition. We know when we are hungry and thirsty. We have cravings for certain foods and other foods are repulsive to us."<sup>24</sup>

"We are endowed with an accurate definite sense of when it is time to leave off or partake of food and drink."<sup>25</sup> During illness we are averse to certain foods and have a desire for certain other foods.<sup>26</sup>

"This desire for certain foods and drinks is not to be confused with a dipsomania's craving for alcohol or a glutton's for tasty foods. This is the inner sensation of a person who moderately enjoys his pleasure, and who makes it his study to discover the reality of his desires for food and who has acquired by degrees a facility in being able to determine what he really needs and what would agree with him."<sup>27</sup>

"In its healthy state the human stomach directs us to certain classes of foods. If we studied the voice of nature often enough, and in a perfectly unprejudiced manner, we would obtain a great facility in understanding its feeblest manifestations. When we accustom ourselves to attend dispassionately to the wants of our stomach, our inner sensations become more distinct and more perceptible. This sense is more clear to persons who live upon simple articles of food. The palate is seduced and deceived by contradictory mixtures. The taste of a healthy person decoys him into eating unwholesome things, when these are mixed with wholesome foods."<sup>28</sup>

"Moderation and active watchfulness enable us to determine to a mouthful when we have taken enough for our health. This faithful obedience to the internal voice of our digestive organs, relative to the proper

quantity of nutriment we should take in, is achieved by a moderation that can not be bribed by a corrupt palate."<sup>29</sup>

"It is possible, though difficult, to attain sufficient proficiency in attention to those hints from our digestive organs that beckon us to certain classes or even certain varieties of nutriment that are most wholesome for the particular state of our system. This latter art (what to eat) can be acquired only after perfecting oneself in the former one (how much to eat)."<sup>30</sup> "During an illness our inner hints are more clear and loud. We perceptibly lose our appetite for certain classes and even varieties of food, and a desire for other classes and varieties is developed, without our knowing why."<sup>31</sup>

#### NUTRITION IN ILL HEALTH

"The influence of diet in case of disease is significant. In acute diseases—except in cases of mental alienation and delirium—the delicate subtle, infallible (unerring) tact of the internal awakened sense, determines so clearly, so much in conformity with nature, that the physician needs only to counsel the friends and attendants of the patient not to refuse anything that the patient urgently desires, and not to exceed the requirements of the patient."<sup>32</sup> In chronic diseases, Hahnemann advises removal of all medicinal substances from the diet.<sup>33</sup> He stresses moderation in all things, even the harmless ones.<sup>34</sup>

The idea of "watching dis-passionately" has been well-known and practised in China<sup>35</sup>, Greece,<sup>36</sup> India<sup>37</sup> and in many more lands for centuries. Hahnemann seems to have adopted it from Confucius, whom he greatly revered.<sup>38</sup> Amalgamating it with the recognition of enteroceptive signals, he brought to realisation the hope of his contemporary, Goethe: *Orient und occident sind nicht mehr zu trennen.*

#### NOTES

(1) Hippocrates, about 460 B.C., had recognized that all foods might not suit all people.<sup>39</sup> In all probability Hahnemann adopted his views from Hippocrates.

(2) R. E. Dudgeon's translation has "sour crout" for the German word "Sauerkraut". Dudgeon's version is not traceable in English dictionaries. The German original is included in *Webster's Lexicon* of 1978. This dictionary as well as the Muret Saunders (1931) translate the word as "fermented cabbage".

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