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**AGRICULTURE AND  
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## *Discussion group II*

# *Agriculture and the health of the nation*

J L JOLLANS

As a guide to discussion, the broad question posed to the group was 'How best can agriculture and the countryside contribute to the physical, mental, social and spiritual health of the nation? '.

Considerable difficulty was experienced in attempting to define 'health'. The doctors tended towards the view that such a definition was not really needed whilst those from other disciplines wished for a more precise description of the subject that the group was supposed to discuss. Though aware of the inadequacies involved, members finally agreed to the description 'to be born, to grow and to live without pain, disease or fear, in equilibrium with one's environment'.

Early discussion was deliberately kept free to ascertain the interests of members and to identify all aspects considered relevant to the subject. Three main areas were identified:

- (i) Food supplies.
- (ii) Water supplies.
- (iii) Other ways in which agriculture may affect national health, whether favourably or adversely.

### Food supplies

The broad association between diet and health was accepted but, in view of the present fluid state of research results, considerable doubts were expressed as to whether there is sufficient reliable knowledge to justify positive recommendations for major dietary change by the general population. That major control of certain diseases had been achieved in the past with little knowledge was proposed, and generally accepted, as adequate justification for current nutritional advice, but it seems clear

that changes to that advice must be expected in future. One member suggested that advice regarding the reduction of dietary fat, particularly saturated fat, may be the most reliable, with advice concerning dietary fibre being more liable to future correction. There appeared to be general acceptance of the broad view that current diets in the UK are inappropriate but rather less agreement on specific factors.

The relative importance of nutritional composition and of the dangers of chemical contaminants and food additives led to wide discussion. Those members with expertise in these areas were agreed that nutritional imbalance is of far greater importance than contaminants and additives in the country at present. They cited the high incidence of metabolic diseases and the low incidence of poisoning to support their case. Other members clearly had intuitive reservations about this view, suggesting possible links between long-term, low-level exposure to contaminants and the incidence of cancers. Whilst accepting that individual chemicals undergo strict testing procedures, they noted that mixtures of chemicals are not so rigorously tested.

The necessity to label food, in a manner which would enable informed purchasers to exercise choice, was debated at length. Though some members wished for full information on nutritive content, contaminants and additives, it was agreed that this would be impracticable. Labelling should emphasise the main nutrients, such as fat and sucrose, but the care of health through control of contaminants and additives is best achieved by vigilant authorities and expert committees under a paternalistic government.

Members were particularly concerned at the current divorce of farmers from their ultimate markets due to nutritionally-irrelevant subsidies and grants. There was general agreement that the government and the European Community should formulate policies which combine food production, processing, consumption and human health in a logical manner. The present inconsistency between medical recommendations to reduce saturated fat consumption and subsidies on butter to increase consumption was particularly noted.

The consequences of linking nutritional and agricultural policies may reduce the demand for certain farm products, notably milk. There is need to study the alternative options available to farmers so that the transition to new products can be effected without causing undue financial or social stress. In view of the current overproduction of most temperate foods, the opportunities for timber production deserve consideration.

#### Water supplies

This subject was not discussed at length but the problems associated with nitrate in drinking water was noted as of particular importance. Again there is need for consistent government and EC planning which encompasses farming practice and human health within the same policies.

It may be necessary to adopt lower input farming systems in future, particularly with regard to nitrogen use.

Other contributions of farming and the countryside to human health

Many people suggest that physical, mental and social health can benefit from activities in, and appreciation of, the countryside but this is a nebulous subject which has been ignored by researchers. The group suggest that there is need for positive information before debate can become useful.

Firstly, members question whether all people can benefit or whether only a section of the population is receptive. Some people seem to prefer the urban environment. Secondly, we need to establish which factors of farming and the countryside are most appreciated by various groups of people and what benefits they think they receive from those factors. Surveys of public opinion are needed to establish bases for further investigation.

Members accepted that there will be difficulties in quantifying certain aspects and that imaginative approaches will be needed by researchers. However, they considered that the potential benefits are great and that more positive identification of causal factors is needed to justify investment in their enhancement.

The different approaches of European countries to the organisation of farming and to the encouragement of different aspects of the physical and social environments of the countryside was noted. This suggests that comparative studies might identify benefits not enjoyed or encouraged in rural areas of Britain.

Adverse effects on health were also recognised and members were concerned that there had been little positive response from government to the Seventh Report of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (The 'Kornberg report' : Cmnd 7644; London, HMSO).

Finally, some members questioned whether the UK is sufficiently sure of the benefits of many current farming practices to justify their export to developing countries. Though the technical aspects may be well understood, the consequences for the overall physical, mental and social health of the nation - even maybe for its spiritual health - are poorly appreciated.