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Optimum Nutrition for the Mind Conference **31st January-2nd February 2004 Cecil Sharp House, London NW1**

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This was an excellent conference put on by The Mental Health Project in affiliation with the Institute of Optimum Nutrition and the International Society of Orthomolecular Medicine who brought together an impressive group of lecturers to focus on this fascinating and important subject.



The two days managed to cover a wide array of areas of growing understanding in relation to the way in which our mental health is strongly influenced by nutrition. For most of us this is only too apparent when we get hungry or let our blood sugar drop too precipitously but this conference, took us far beyond such everyday truisms that we feel better if we eat right, to explore the ways in which nutrition is increasingly being seen as a key tool in the quest to deal with the epidemic of mental health problems facing the world.

As the population ages there is a growing interest in ways to stay healthy as well as a growth in the science of what is good for us. There were 230 million over 65s in the world in 1975, 420m in 2000 and there will be 830m in 2025. In 1996 there were 120 papers on nutritional science in peer reviewed journals. In 2002 there were over 1000. (The Economist 13/12/03).

The incidence of depression, anxiety, dementia, learning difficulties, hyperactivity, autism, schizophrenia, and Alzheimer's are on the increase according to the World Health Organisation. This conference brought together a number of the leading researchers and clinicians whose work tends to confirm the view that a significant proportion of mentally unwell people do not fully recover on drugs ("*Drugs can make you better, but they can't make you well*" Hoffer) because the primary cause of their problem is not a lack of drugs, but a chemical imbalance brought on by years of inadequate nutrition and exposure to pollutants, environmental toxins and stress, often in those whose biochemical individuality makes them more susceptible to these challenges.

Of course, there *are* other factors involved such as genetic susceptibility and the vast field of upbringing and exposure to love and nurturing throughout life, but it was salutary to have one's view widened as to the crucial role nutrition can play in many major psychiatric illnesses.

The conference was well chaired and organised by Patrick Holford, a recent speaker at the BOA conference and a well known writer and lecturer on Nutrition. There were good opportunities to question and discuss with the speakers at forums at the end of each session.

With fourteen speakers and five forums let alone a half day pre-conference primer and numerous trade stands, there is not room here to give more than a flavour of personal highlights. Subjects focused on the nutritional approach to mental health ranged from Autism, Learning difficulties and ADHD, Allergies, Minerals, The Thyroid, DHA and intellectual development, Eating Disorders, Depression, Primary care, Homocysteine and both general mental health and Alzheimer's, measuring Neurotransmitter imbalances, Dementia and Schizophrenia.

Of particular interest to many osteopaths who struggle to help Autistic children, paediatrician Dr. Mary Megson, outlined her work on this disorder which is linked to a disruption of G-alpha protein affecting retinoid receptors in the brain. Studies suggest that autism may be caused by adding a

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second defect, the pertussis toxin found in the DPT and DTaP vaccines in genetically vulnerable children. The histories of night blindness in the families lead her to work with vitamin A to help the rod function in these children. She explored many fascinating ideas that start to make autistic behaviour more understandable.

Also of particular interest to those of us deeply involved in working with children and Learning Difficulties was Dr. Alex Richardson from Oxford University, who gave her usual excellent master class on her research into Essential Fatty acids in this area. As she pointed out, the old paradigm governing human nutrition was based on physical growth; the new is shifting to the health of our brains. For those still in doubt as to the influence of nutrition on behaviour the growing body of research into nutrition and young offenders shows dramatic evidence, for example up to 40% reductions in violent behaviour, with simple nutritional changes. We await the Durham research project on Dyslexia with interest.

There is growing evidence that the apparent world wide rise in depression over the past century may be less the result of people's greater willingness to admit to feeling bad, but rather is a real phenomenon connected to the fall in oily fish consumption and other key nutrients.

It was heartening to hear Professor André Tylee, from the Institute of Psychiatry, (an osteopath enthusiast himself) speak positively, if rather frustratedly, about influencing the Nutritional agenda in Primary Mental Health Care. However, perhaps the G.O.s.C. should be hiring advisors like Tyree *now* to help us manage the osteopathic profession's onward march into governmental control and guidelines. Caveat emptor, looking at the levels of burn out in General Practice (2000 pages of journals to read a month, growing levels of exhaustion, depression and declining job satisfaction) we could well take care we do not blindly walk into the same trap and look back at our working lives out on the disparaged fringe with nostalgic longing, as we, like today's G.P.'s, find our scope of practice and levels of bureaucracy reach job spoiling levels!

The icing on the cake of the conference was a live video link up to Canada with one of the grand old men of orthomolecular medicine, Dr. Abram Hoffer, telling his story of the origins fifty years ago of his ground breaking work with Niacin in treating Schizophrenia and the evolution of his work to date. Given the subject matter, it was like a live link to Kirksville to speak to Dr. Still himself.

I came away with a greater understanding of the role of DHA in the *structure* of the brain and its vital role in intellectual development and the role of EPA on the *function* of the brain in later maturation; the role of the all important Homocysteine in mental health and dementia; a reminder of the crucial role of the often missed "sub clinical" hypo-thyroid; the need for vigilance and team work in the treatment of eating disorders; and much, much more.

The twenty first century is seeing great world wide changes in health issues. It is questionable how much impact the osteopathic profession can have on illnesses such as AIDS. However, several changes are of vital importance to the future possible shape and working focus of the profession. Some of these are; the aging population increasing the amount of muscular skeletal dysfunction; the dangerous rise of obesity; the enormous need to shift the focus of our dependence on high risk drug treatment toward hands-on physical treatments, life style change coaching and nutritional intervention. All fall well within our potential reach, as general practitioners of health. We haven't even mentioned psychological support and befriending needed due to the expanding levels of untreated mental health problems in young and old alike. It was good to see a few osteopathic faces at the conference, although our profile is still woefully invisible to most professionals battling with these issues.

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Perhaps we should look again at the, mostly minimalist, level of nutritional and psychological medicine taught in our already overworked colleges as well as encourage greater special interest streams in these areas in post-graduate CPD.

More information can be found out about the conference on: <http://www.mentalhealthproject.com>

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