

By Dr TEE E SIONG

**L**AST year was an active year for scientific activities on nutrition in the country and the region. There were numerous activities and programmes promoting healthy nutrition amongst the community. Let me do a roundup of some of these activities, especially those which I have participated in.

### Updates in nutrition science

Continuing what has been carried out for the past 25 years, the 26th annual scientific conference of the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM) was held in late March. The five symposia over the two days saw 24 presentations and attracted over 400 participants. Two symposia were dedicated to exploring child health and nutrition, where speakers shared research updates ranging from maternal-infant nutrition and breastfeeding to child and adolescent nutritional and dietary status.

The largest nutrition congress in the region is the Asian Congress of Nutrition (ACN), held every four years under the auspices of the Federation of Asian Nutrition Societies. The 11th ACN was held in Singapore in mid-July, organised by the Singapore Nutrition and Dietetics Association.

Many NSM members participated in the congress. The theme of this ACN, "Nutritional Well-Being for a Progressive Asia – Challenges and Opportunities", is a reminder that as Asia progresses further into developed status, it is imperative that the nutritional wellbeing of the population is not neglected.

Recognising that nutrition plays a key role in the optimum health of a woman, the Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of Malaysia organised its second regional conference on nutrition in obstetrics & gynaecology in March, in collaboration with NSM. This conference explored the latest in many pertinent issues essential to obstetricians and gynaecologists, nutritionists, dietitians, midwives and staff nurses.

In order to promote the consumption of whole grains, it is essential to provide consumers with a good understanding of what whole grains are and their health benefits. The regulatory system also needs to look into the development, marketing and advertising of whole grain products. The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) SEA collaborated with NSM to organise a scientific seminar on "Whole Grains in Human Nutrition" in April to deliberate on these issues.

A great deal of attention is now being given to the potential health benefits of functional foods and components. However, there must be adequate scientific proof that these functional foods do indeed improve health, beyond that provided by nutrients.

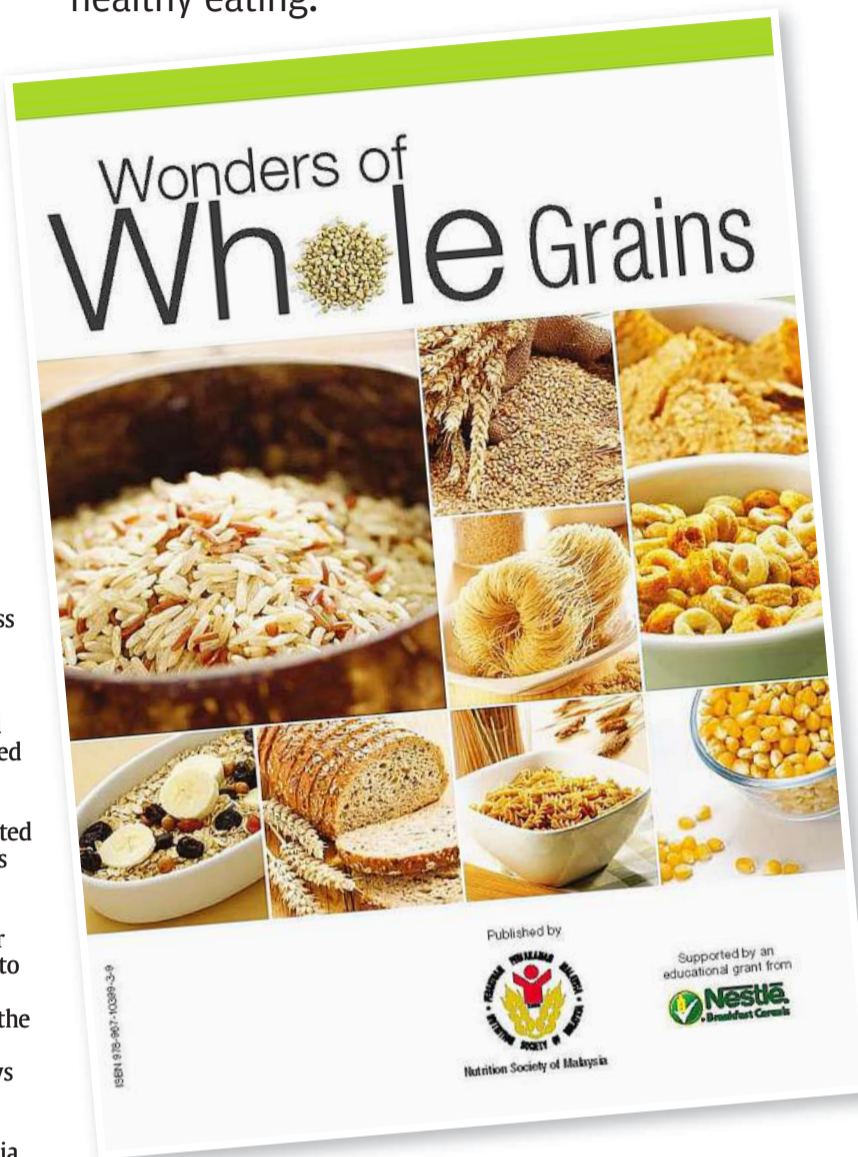
I participated in three scientific meetings on functional foods. The first was an ILSI Europe's conference on functional foods in Prague. The second was a conference organised by Universiti Putra Malaysia. The third was the 20th anniversary symposium on intestinal flora in Tokyo which focused on the role of probiotics on intestinal microbiota.

### Nutrition policies and guidelines

The Health Ministry's Technical Working Group on Nutritional Guidelines commenced work on

# A fruitful year

Collaborative efforts are needed to promote nutrition science and healthy eating.



The *Wonders of Whole Grains* was published to help consumers further understand the nutritional benefits of whole grains and the many ways to consume more of these wholesome foods.

establishing a set of guidelines for children. Based on the main Malaysian Dietary Guidelines of 2010, the messages and recommendations to be developed shall be tailored to the needs of children.

The ministry's National Coordinating Committee for Food and Nutrition is a high level technical committee that oversees the planning and implementation of nutrition programmes in the country. It is a multi-agency committee, and the NSM has been a member of this committee and contributed to discussions on the plans and activities.

Nutritionist is one of the professions included in the proposed Allied Health Profession Bill. It is the intention that only suitably qualified nutritionists can be registered to practise this profession. The matter continued to be discussed in 2011, with the formation of a Technical Committee on Allied Health Profession for Nutritionists. Discussions on the associated regulations were also carried out. I certainly hope that the matter can be resolved speedily as it has been discussed for over 15 years.

### Reaching out to the community

Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) aims to promote greater awareness and practice of healthy eating and active living. Initiated in 2002, NMM is a collaborative effort among fellow professional bodies, namely NSM, Malaysian Dietitians'

Association (MDA), and Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity (MASO).

The project also has the support of the Health Ministry, particularly its nutrition division. For the past few years, the Education Ministry has also been collaborating in this programme.

With the theme "Healthy Children, Healthier Nation – Start Young", NMM 2011 focused on bringing about greater awareness of the importance of optimum nutrition, physical activities and hygiene in children.

Various activities were carried out, commencing with a family carnival to launch NMM and to provide families with the opportunity to learn nutrition in a fun way.

To reach out to children, a series of Nutrifun educational roadshows were conducted in kindergartens and schools. Educational materials were published, including a series of press articles to reach out to all Malaysians, and a guide and recipe book entitled *Wholesome Meals – Practical and Healthy Recipes for Your Growing Child*.

### Promoting child nutrition

The NSM continued with implementing the Healthy Kids Programme (HKP), which was launched in 2010. HKP comprises a two-pronged programme, the first being a number of awareness promotion activities among primary school children and parents.

In the second component, six

educational modules on healthy eating and active living were developed and implemented to a group of Year 3 children.

The effectiveness of the modules to improve knowledge, attitude and practices on nutrition and physical activity of the children was evaluated. A dedicated website, [www.healthykids.org.my](http://www.healthykids.org.my), was set up to serve as an educational resource.

Feeding young children can be a very challenging affair. But tantrums, poor appetites and playfulness are part and parcel of children growing up. To assist parents on how to prevent or manage such situations, NSM published a booklet for parents with children aged six to 36 months in its Healthy Mealtime Magic programme. The booklet, *Handy Tips and Happy Tales to make kids (and mommies) smile*, takes a light-hearted approach, using cartoon animals, story-telling, and games to help parents make mealtimes magical and enjoyable for children. It also offers nutrition facts, creative recipes and practical tips.

### Promoting healthy cooking practices

Two volumes of *Healthy Recipe, Wise Choice*, previously published by the NSM, have been very well received as they provide healthier ways of preparing various popular Malaysian dishes.

To continue to provide consumers with actual examples and guides, the NSM produced its third recipe book, *Nutritionists' Choice Cookbook: Healthy Recipes for Your Little Ones*. This volume focuses on a child's first few years of life, from infancy to toddlerhood, and the preschool years. This cookbook intends to provide nutrition information, and to guide parents and other caregivers in preparing simple yet nutritious meals.

While the NSM healthy recipe books have reached many household kitchens by now, it is necessary to have more innovative ways to disseminate these recipes and nutrition information to even more people.

*TryMasak Sihat with NSM* uses new media approaches to bring all these recipes to every household. Users can now watch the three- to five-minute cooking videos for 100 healthy recipes on the TryMasak ([www.trymasak.my/sihat/](http://www.trymasak.my/sihat/)) or NSM ([www.nutriweb.org.my](http://www.nutriweb.org.my)) websites.

### Promoting maternal and child health

There is no disputing the fact that breastfeeding is the best way to nourish babies. However, there may be some concerns among mothers about their ability to breastfeed their baby well. There are also misconceptions about breastfeeding that discourage many mothers from breastfeeding their baby.

Recognising this, NSM collaborated with the Obstetrical & Gynaecological Society of Malaysia, Malaysian Paediatric Association, and the National Population & Family Development Board, to publish *Breastfeed with Confidence*. Packed with expert advice and

practical tips, this book presents an upbeat contemporary approach to guide mothers on how to breast-feed right.

Eating healthily is very crucial during pregnancy, because the energy and nutrients consumed during this period will be channelled towards nourishing baby and also enhancing the mother's health. NSM published a booklet, *Healthy Eating during Pregnancy and Lactation*, to guide mothers to eat healthily in order to meet increased nutritional needs during this vital period.

Most people are unaware of the various benefits that whole grains have to offer. Wholegrain foods consumption is associated with a lower risk of several chronic diseases. In view of this, many health authorities, as well as the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines, have highlighted the importance of incorporating more whole grains into our daily diet.

NSM published a compact booklet, *Wonders of Whole Grains*, to help consumers further understand the nutritional benefits of whole grains and the many ways to consume more of these wholesome foods.

### Building strategic alliances

The problem of diet-related chronic diseases continued to be highlighted in the country, amongst the scientific community, healthcare professionals, policy makers, and the food industry. There has been a great deal of emphasis on the severity of the problem of obesity and the associated health consequences.

What is needed is certainly more concrete actions for the prevention of chronic lifestyle diseases. I do hope to see greater efforts to empower the people with the knowledge to make appropriate food choices.

There must be more avenues for the people to have access to unbiased food and nutrition information.

Some successful collaborations can be seen from the NMM programme, and the various community nutrition promotion programmes, as well as the scientific activities summarised above. These were carried out by professional bodies, especially the NSM, in collaboration with the private sector.

Without funding from these companies, it would not have been possible for professional bodies to carry out such nutrition activities. I hope to see more of such collaborative efforts to bring valuable unbiased nutrition messages to the people.

The private sector is an important stakeholder in the prevention of chronic lifestyle diseases; we work with them for strategic alliances, while at the same time, maintaining our professionalism.

Most of the NSM publications mentioned in this article can be viewed on [www.nutriweb.org.my](http://www.nutriweb.org.my) and can be purchased by emailing [president@nutriweb.org.my](mailto:president@nutriweb.org.my).

■ Dr Tee E Siong pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For more information, email [starhealth@thestar.com.my](mailto:starhealth@thestar.com.my).