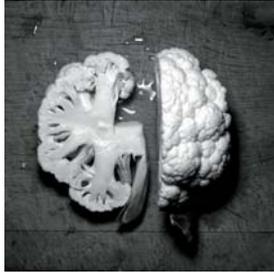


FOOD, MENTAL WELL BEING AND BEHAVIOUR

Presentation to the
Associate Parliamentary
Food and Health Forum
on its investigation into the
links between diet and behaviour

Courtney Van de Weyer
Sustain
courtney@sustainweb.org



Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming

A registered charity based in London, but working
throughout the UK

Umbrella of over 100 national and international public interest
organisations, all of which are interested in some
aspect of food and farming.

Works to promote a more equitable and sustainable food system.

Food and Mental Health

The Food and Mental Health Project aims to increase the
awareness of the link between diet, mental health and behaviour.

The Project initially produced a report detailing the evidence of the
link, along with a series of policy recommendations.

The Project now works to implement those recommendations.

A connection between what we eat and how we feel?

In a word, **yes**.

It is simply **not rational** to accept – as it is – that the body is affected
by nutrition, yet separate out the brain from this equation.

The brain is a **physical organ** in the body, just as the heart or liver.

The manifestation of the brain's processes are feelings and,
ultimately, behaviour – as such, it is **self-evident** that nutrition
affects mental health.

Present state of the research

- Incalculable anecdotes
 - subtle to dramatic changes reported
- Good amount of published evidence
 - Epidemiological
 - Physiological
 - RCTs)

As seen throughout this investigation, results are controversial

**An obvious need for more research, particularly
larger scale controlled trials**

Okay, but who is going to fund research?

- Pharmaceutical industry? No
- Food industry? No
- Supplement industry? Maybe, but usually limited to
providing own product to test.
- Government?

And what is being researched?

- Testing 'food'?
 - RCT's (with some exceptions) tend to test the effect of one nutrient.
 - Humans do not eat nutrients – **they eat food.**
 - We still have much to learn about the effects of nutrients on the body - but we DO know that food affects it.
- Interpreting 'behaviour'?
- Will it ever be 'proven'?

Omega-3 – why so much attention?

- Plausible physiology – DHA/EPA in the brain, etc.
- Evidence of decrease in the food supply and in the diet.
- A number of trials concentrating on it, some showing promising – if limited – results.

But also...

- Aggressive marketing by fish oil supplement companies
- Innovations in food technology (encapsulation)
- Nostalgia for cod liver oil, leading to familiarity
- Increasing medicalisation of health – easier to treat through a pill than change the food supply!

Fish oil for all!

- Clever milk? Or, how about clever orange juice, clever yogurt, clever chocolate, clever pizza, clever bread and on and on...
 - More expensive...any benefit?
- Which supplement?
 - Massive difference in dose, ratio and source.
 - Could always use the one used in the trial!
(But, research hasn't shown that supplementing will help the average child – marketing neglects to mention...)
- What about the rest of the diet? Balance with omega-6?

No fish in the sea?

- 75% of the world's fisheries are fully exploited, over-exploited or significantly depleted (conservative estimate?)
- Population does not even eat the recommended amount of fish - so why is one recommended to be non-oily?
- Fish oil comes from fish...

A healthy diet?

- Boring, but true?
- Policies that help and encourage **every individual** to eat a **balanced, healthy diet**, incorporating **all** of the necessary nutrients for brain – and thus mental – health.
- This isn't 'alternative' – it is **essential** to health.

What can this Forum recommend?

- More research – but, again, funding from where?
- SACN – Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition to evaluate evidence and make recommendations? (upcoming 'Horizon Scanning' meeting in October)
- Simply that the Government acknowledges a link?
 - Provide greater urgency for already proposed changes to the food system – cost of mental + physical health?
 - Food in hospitals, improve cooking skills, ban trans fats, junk food marketing, etc.?
 - More widespread acceptance (e.g., GPs) to bring more mainstream?
- But, perhaps most effective...

Breakfast clubs

- Widespread (and only) agreement on evidence that breakfast leads to children performing better on mental tasks
- Unsurprising that hungry children can't concentrate in school
- Inability to concentrate = poor school performance = cycle of deprivation
- Surprising level of need for breakfast clubs (hunger, not just wrong types of food served at home)
- Most are under-funded and fragile – some need to charge

Recommend that children who are entitled to free school meals also be provided with a free school breakfast

Thank you

