Professor Barrie Margetts, President of WPHNA, champions a preventive population approach to public health, and is dedicated to improving the system and structure within which nutrition operates to ensure its effectiveness across the globe.
ANALYSIS

Could you give us an insight into the World Public Health Nutrition Association (WPHNA)’s origins?

WPHNA was born from a meeting in Barcelona, Spain, in 2006, which focused on the more public health aspects of nutrition that were often overlooked in large international nutrition conferences, even though prevention and a population approach were agreed to be the key long-term solutions to major global nutrition problems. Participants felt that we needed a forum to promote and discuss the underlying causes and solutions to these global problems, as well as provide professional support for those working in public health nutrition.

How did you become involved with the Association?

I attended the initial meeting in Barcelona that agreed to its establishment. I was subsequently involved in drafting the constitution and later elected as WPHNA’s first president. One of the organisation’s important decisions was to not receive money from any food companies whose products are incompatible with public health. This is because all too often big meetings and nutrition societies are funded by big food companies that distort what they say and do. WPHNA’s Rio 2012 conference and our recent Oxford 2014 meeting were not funded by the food industry, which gave us great freedom to speak with an independent and unbiased voice—our motivation is doing what is right for the poor and disadvantaged.

Why is there a particular focus on disadvantaged areas?

Disadvantaged areas and groups have little power and are most affected by these issues. Often, actions aimed at improving the health of these groups is not based on their needs; they have no voice, and are not heard when the pressures of big transnational companies are forcing governments into opening up access to markets for their unhealthy foods. Global trade rules also favour big countries and their companies, to the disadvantage of smaller, poorer countries. One of the key roles of World Nutrition is to highlight the practices of big companies that are negatively impacting on small communities and the poor.

Are there barriers to awareness of the importance of nutrition?

Food is an integral component of our everyday lives and a key part of how families and cultural groups define themselves. So in one sense we all know what we should eat and what is healthy, but numerous pressures tend to push us away from these healthy choices—either because healthy foods are more expensive or unhealthy foods are heavily marketed and subsidised so that they are cheaper.

One tactic of big companies, such as those that rely on sugar, is to try to confuse people by presenting information in ways that can be misinterpreted. We often hear that people are confused by all the conflicting evidence, but this confusion is often promoted by big companies so that their products are not singled out. Big food companies are using the same tactics as tobacco companies did to delay legislation to restrict promotion and marketing of their products. For example, when the Mayor of New York tried to limit the serving sizes of sodas in fast food outlets, they were opposed by groups arguing that this was “un-American” and an infringement of people’s rights—and these groups were secretly funded by Coca-Cola.

These companies have also funded campaigns against local governments trying to increase taxes in soft drinks or sodas. While big companies tend to follow the rules agreed about promoting unhealthy foods to children in Europe and North America, they do not apply these same rules when marketing their products in poor countries. This even applies to marketing practices for breast milk substitutes. Nestlé are still giving away free samples in maternity wards in poor countries, something they claimed had stopped. A big step forward is for companies and groups to have to declare any conflicts of interest when talking about nutrition. Without strong independent civil societies keeping a watch and reporting on such activities, companies will continue to get away with these practices.

What are WPHNA’s present foci?

In recent months we have been working closely with a number of partners to help build action to address the double burden of malnutrition—ie where both under- and overnutrition co-exist in the same population, and even family. It is not generally well understood that chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity affect more people in low- and middle-income countries than in high-income countries. In many areas of the world there are still far too many underdeveloped children, and also far too many overweight children.

Another implication of this double burden is that being undernourished in early life increases the impact of being overweight; children who were stunted as babies who survive and have access to enough food are more likely to become overweight, diabetic and have heart disease as adults. A major priority for us is to see how we can improve the nutrition and health of young women before they become pregnant. One of the big drivers for the global rise in obesity is increasingly cheap access to highly processed foods and beverages, which are displacing healthy, nutritious local foods. These unhealthy foods are heavily marketed and high in fat, salt and sugar.

Can you discuss the need for a preventive population approach?

We cannot wait until people have health problems before trying to treat them. This can’t be our only healthcare strategy, as no country can afford this. Obesity costs about US $2 trillion every year—as much as smoking, wars and civil unrest. At present, we invest a tiny fraction of health budgets on prevention. Ensuring young women are well nourished before they become pregnant and children grow well in early life are key to the long-term prevention of chronic diseases. Ensuring schools are healthy environments, where children eat well and have time and space to be active are crucial to their longer-term health.

Critical to this preventive approach is a proactive government that uses legislation and taxation to regulate unhealthy products, such as tobacco and alcohol, and consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages. Increasing the price of unhealthy products reduces consumption and this has long-term benefits for health. Linked to this is a need for primary healthcare to enforce systems for early detection before diseases and conditions become too well established. These services need to be funded, but the challenge...
is dealing with the current burden of treatment costs while funding preventive services that will in the long-term save money. This will require political will and support from the public.

**What can WPHNA members expect from involvement with the organisation?**

By joining the Association, members gain access to a group of like-minded people committed to helping each other do their jobs better and acting as a voice to stand up for those that cannot do that for themselves. As a charity and not-for-profit organisation that does not take money from big industry, the Association relies on volunteers to help us with our work. For people with like-minded views it is a way of making a difference, often against what seem like huge problems. Our website and journal provide people with insights and news they will not find in other places, and all these activities need people to gather the information and turn them into stories. I like to quote the Hindu belief that if we all hold hands in a circle, we support each other; sometimes we receive, sometimes we give, but together we are stronger.

**Is the Association engaged in any important collaborations or initiatives?**

As a small organisation we work with other like-minded groups around the world. One example is our involvement with the conflict of interest coalition. Here, many hundreds of groups worldwide are working together to raise awareness about the involvement of conflicted industries in global decision making processes run by the UN. This coalition argues that policies should be independent of the influences of vested interests, and only once policies have been agreed can companies start to work with governments to enact policy recommendations.

For many UN processes there are open consultation processes to get feedback from civil societies, and we often collaborate with other groups to strengthen and unify the voice with which we speak. We have supported UN agencies to help build capacity in many countries and worked with many groups to help improve the quality of training in public health nutrition in universities around the world.

**Notably, you were awarded an honorary doctorate from the North-West University in South Africa in 2009. Is this your proudest achievement to date?**

I do not look to personal awards and honours as motivation for what I do; the reward is being given the opportunity to contribute and give something back. While I very much appreciated the honorary doctorate, I saw it as recognition for the work I had done as part of a team. I derive great satisfaction and pride from seeing former students and younger colleagues growing and becoming leaders who are doing things better than I did. For me it has been a privilege to work with people in South Africa committed to the new South Africa. We need to empower people in poor countries to take control of their own affairs and to help when asked on equal terms, not with us holding the power and dictating what we will do for them. People are our only asset.