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THE NUTRITION SURVEY OF THE UNION.

by

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Address delivered at the Nutrition Conference convened jointly by the South African National Council for Child Welfare, the South African Institute of Race Relations and the National Council of Women of South Africa.

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The great concentration of attention during recent years in all civilized countries on the problems of nutrition has yielded one undisputed fact; that is that defective feeding in childhood causes damage which may be irreparable. Defective feeding seldom means gross shortage of food. What is undermining the health of great masses of the population is the shortage of the costly protective foods. These are the foods which are rich in vitamins, minerals and proteins and which are invariably more expensive than starch foods.

That such defective feeding of children has been occurring on a massive scale in South Africa is being borne in on the minds of many observers. The evidence has been accumulating for all to see. A large number of the young men examined annually for recruitment to our Active Citizen Force shows clear evidence of undernourishment during childhood in various degrees of body deformities. Subnormal growth, poor musculature, poor condition of the skin and bad dental development are among the more obvious signs. Gross vitamin deficiency in diet shows itself by outbreaks of scurvy and pellagra in Native territories. A lesser deficiency of protective substances in the food eaten shows itself among large groups of the population in undue susceptibility to attack by disease. Malaria has its most devastating effects among malnourished poor White and Bantu communities. Leprosy, typhus and typhoid flourish where insanitation is combined with inadequate nutrition. But perhaps the most striking single evidence of the effects of under-nourishment is the rapid increase in the incidence of tuberculosis amongst the poorest sections of the community, white and black.

All this evidence is available to prove that children in the Union have for many years been got little of the protective foods including milk and eggs, vegetables, fruit and meat.

The public conscience has been aroused. This has shown itself not only in philanthropic efforts to relieve manifest suffering. It has resulted also in a demand that the whole matter be thoroughly investigated, so that effective measures for combating the evil may be introduced. Hence the acceptance by the Government during the 1937 session of Parliament of the Malherbe motion:

"That the Government be requested to consider the advisability of instituting a survey of the nutrition of the people of the Union to be followed by systematic teaching of the principles of nutrition, such teaching to be carried out by the Department of Public Health; and that the Council of Public Health be requested to advise on the best means of undertaking this work, the staff of the Department of Public Health, if necessary, being augmented to give effect to the purpose in view."

This resolution was implemented by the Council of Public Health at its meeting in January, 1938, when detailed arrangements were made for the carrying out of a preliminary national survey of nutritional conditions among European school children. That survey has now been completed and the voluminous data collected are being examined by the Office of Census and Statistics. Further, more intensive studies both among European and non-European groups of the population are in progress which will doubtless produce valuable data on which may be built a constructive policy for combating a great evil.

The survey of school children was carefully planned. Uniform sets of instruments had to be obtained so that the observations made by various observers spread over the country would be comparable. For the same reason the instruments had first to be assembled at the Central Medical Stores in Pretoria for exact calibration. School medical officers from the four provinces met in Pretoria to discuss the nature of the observations to be made and to agree on exact methods of measurement. Thus armed they and the school nurses working under them accomplished during the second half of last year the great task of collecting data of diet and the physical and clinical condition of 140,928 school children. The equally great task of classification and tabulation of this material has not been completed. But so great was the interest displayed in this survey that the justifiable impatience had to be met by the publication of an interim report which has been placed before this Conference.

This preliminary study has already revealed useful information. It sets out certain facts regarding a third of the

male European population of the Union between the ages of 6 and 16 years. The sample is large enough to eliminate most if not all the factors attributable to chance.

In this survey the nutritive condition of school children was studied from three angles: the nature and amount of food actually consumed; the condition of the pupils assessed by ordinary clinical standards; the nutrition condition as assessed by actual body measurements. The report before you gives an account of the findings by the first and second of these methods.

The table showing the percentage of European boys taking certain meals and articles of diet indicates that few of these white boys actually go hungry. Most of them have three meals a day. Some very unsatisfactory qualitative features are, however, revealed. Thus it will be observed that only a third of them have milk as a regular article of diet, while more than a third of them have no milk at all. This is a terrible state of affairs. Hygienists cannot be satisfied that the health of the Union is satisfactorily assured until there is available a pint of milk daily for every child in the country. This applies particularly to the lower strata of society. It is theoretically possible for children of wealthy parents to be given expensive substitutes for milk; but for the population as a whole daily consumption of milk by the children must be considered as indispensable for health. Without it we are laying the foundation for future ills such as tuberculosis which not only involve the country in costly hospitalisation, but also deprive us of the labour of the sufferers. Of very great significance too is the fact that vegetables and fruit either figure only occasionally or are entirely absent from the diets of large numbers of the children.

The clinical examinations were made in each province by the school medical inspectors all of whom have considerable experience with this method. Of 58,165 boys 59.7 per cent. were found to be clinically normal, 40.3 per cent. being malnourished, 6.5 per cent. of them grossly so. The degree of malnutrition will be more clearly brought out when the analysis of the physical measurements becomes available. In these European boys it appears to be in most cases only slight.

Some time will still have to elapse before the further details have been extracted from the records which are necessary for suitable recommendations for amelioration to be made. In particular we wish to ascertain which areas or groups of the

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population are suffering most so that remedial procedures can be applied where most needed. Meanwhile it is of interest to note that of the provinces as a whole Natal comes out best with only 16.4 per cent. of its European school boys in a malnourished condition. The Cape comes next with 31.5 per cent; then the Orange Free State with 42.6 per cent., while in the Transvaal very nearly half the boys are to some extent malnourished, the actual figure being 47.6 per cent.

Sample surveys among the Bantu population are also being carried out by a team of experts. These have been completed in certain selected urban and rural areas. The figures for these surveys have yet to be analysed. They will be particularly valuable as they will give us some idea of the degree of malnutrition among the groups of Bantus examined. As already mentioned we have only too much evidence that grossly inadequate quantities of protective foods are being consumed by large sections of this population. The incidence of various diseases is alarmingly convincing. Again, however, we want information based on scientifically acquired facts. Only with such data can we hope to make the best use of any funds which may be made available for ameliorating the conditions.

**Collection Number: AD1715**

**SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974**

**PUBLISHER:**

*Collection Funder:- Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation*

*Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive*

*Location:- Johannesburg*

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