



VOICES FROM THE FIELD - Improving the Nutritional Health and Well-Being of Women and Young Children

**Lee Rysdale, RD, Project Manager,
NutriSTEP (Nutrition Screening Tool for Every Preschooler)**

(Published online June 15, 2004)

Service perspective

Although the reviewed CEECD papers are American in context,^{1,4-9} except for the two articles on preterm infants by Canadian researcher Sheila Innis² and Stephanie Atkinson,³ the problems that are identified can be generalized to Canadian nutrition practitioners. The issue-specific and general comments are fully recognized in my current role as a researcher and consultant and in my past years of experience as a front-line pediatric dietitian in both clinical and public-health settings.

One of the greatest challenges in dietetic practice is the level of nutrition expertise in primary health-care services. Nutrition has been recognized as a key determinant of maternal and child health outcomes, but appropriate and sufficient allocation and prioritization of resources are lacking. Using a multidisciplinary life-cycle approach, the CEECD research findings support the need to review and consider the realignment of early intervention resources and strategies to address key nutrition issues.¹⁻⁹ This requires the inclusion of and access to sufficient numbers of registered dietitians. This also includes an increased level of nutrition knowledge by other allied health and social-service professionals through additional and ongoing education and training.

The CEECD papers provide evidence that support the many Canadian maternal and pediatric nutrition initiatives, as well as the many proposed initiatives seeking funding support.¹⁻⁹ This includes national work on dietary guidelines for the target populations, including revision work on “Nutrition for Healthy Term Infants,” a national collaborative growth statement, and the upcoming Canadian Community Health Survey 2004 Nutrition component. Other regional, provincial and program-specific initiatives (e.g. Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program, Better Beginnings Better Futures) provide pockets of nutrition information that may or may not be generalizable to our target populations in practice. But until Canadian population-level, cross-sectional and longitudinal nutrition monitoring and surveillance data are available, nutrition practitioners are limited in their work and the application of this much-needed knowledge. This lack of information influences dietary guidelines and revisions, dietary assessment and intervention practices and nutrition promotion and disease prevention strategies.

There are many research gaps that could inform practice:

- The lack of Canadian population-level nutrition data;
- The lack of monitoring and surveillance of nutrition data in Canada;
- The lack of reliable and content-valid nutrition questions for health surveys and nutritional risk screening tools;
- The lack of comprehensively formulated survey questions to investigate the complex issue of maternal and child nutritional health;
- The lack of research on factors influencing the nutritional health and well-being of women and children;
- The lack of resources (financial and human) to evaluate nutrition promotion interventions;
- Insufficient education and training of health and social-service professionals on key nutrition issues affecting the nutritional health of women and young children;
- Inadequate nutrition expertise to provide a multidisciplinary approach to continuity of care to women and children;
- Insufficient “voice” to inform and influence multiple levels of decision- and policy-makers.

At times, overcoming these obstacles appears overwhelming but nutrition practitioners are making advances at the local, regional, provincial and national levels, such as:

- Calgary Health Region has implemented standardized growth measurements in their universal four-year-old immunization clinics. These local growth data will provide baseline information on the growth status of young Calgary children and can be used in the evaluation of a number of health initiatives, including obesity prevention. This work can also contribute to the best practices in growth assessment methodology, and will be useful for comparisons with other populations or groups of young children.
- The Northern Ontario Perinatal and Child Health Survey (NOPCHS) Focused Report on Nutrition provides a glimpse of some nutrition issues for Northern Ontario children between the ages of two and six. This report includes data on parents’ self-reported weights and heights of their child; child meal and snack frequency; child enjoyment and variety of foods and household food security. This report was driven by the lack of data and investment in healthy eating research in Canada and specifically Northern Ontario, and the need for public-health program developers and policy-makers to learn more about healthy eating.
- NutriSTEP (Nutrition Screening Tool for Every Preschooler) is a multiphase nutrition screening tool development and validation project with an overall goal of improving the nutritional health of preschool children (three to five years of age) through the development of a valid and reliable screening tool for use by parents/caregivers and child-care providers, as well as nutrition and health professionals across Ontario and Canada. This tool will increase awareness and educate parents by enabling them to recognize nutritional risk factors and issues, and thus seek early intervention to promote their child’s health and help prevent chronic problems such as obesity.

These initiatives, along with many others, are communicated and positively encouraged through various nutrition networks and collaborations, such as Dietitians of Canada and its Pediatric Nutrition Network. Through these efforts and a strong professional voice, there will be more positive influences with policy-makers. The current political environment and public opinion on health-care priorities and the health status of Canadians (e.g. rising obesity rates) will help the nutrition profession play its advocacy roles, as well as helping to gain recognition of the importance of providing appropriate and sufficient professional nutrition services designed to improve the nutritional and overall health and well-being of Canadian women and children.

REFERENCES

1. Lumey LH, Susser ES. Long-term effects of prenatal and early postnatal nutrition on adult psychosocial outcomes. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2003:1-6. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Lumey-SusserANGxp.pdf>. Accessed June 15, 2004.
2. Innis SM. Nutrition and its impact on psychosocial child development: Preterm infants. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2003:1-6. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/InnisANGxp.pdf>. Accessed June 15, 2004.
3. Atkinson SA. Nutrition and its impact on psychosocial child development: Perspective on preterm infants. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2003:1-6. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/AtkinsonANGxp-Nutrition.pdf>. Accessed June 15, 2004.
4. Reifsnider E. Effective nutritional practices and policies for childbearing and childrearing women. Rev ed. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2006:1-8. Available at: http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/ReifsniderANGxp_rev.pdf. Accessed October 31, 2007.
5. Devaney BL. Program and services to improve the nutrition of pregnant women, infants and young children. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2003:1-8. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/DevaneyANGxp.pdf>. Accessed June 15, 2004.
6. Dubois L. The Impact of prenatal and early postnatal nutrition on child development: Comments on Lumey and Susser, Innis and Devaney. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2004:1-5. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/DuboisANGxp.pdf>. Accessed June 15, 2004.
7. Black M, Hurley KM. Helping children develop healthy eating habits. Rev. ed. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2007:1-10. Available at: http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Black-HurleyANGxp_rev-Nutrition.pdf. Accessed February 19, 2008.
8. Caulfield LE. Nutritional programs and policies for women and children. Commenting: Black, Reifsnider, and Devaney. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal,

- Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2003:1-4. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/CaulfieldANGxp.pdf>. Accessed June 15, 2004.
9. Dewey KG. Facilitating improved nutrition for pregnant and lactating women, and children 0–5 years of age. Commenting: Black, Reifsnider, and Devaney. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2003:1-6. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/DeweyANGxp.pdf>. Accessed June 15, 2004.

To cite this document:

Rysdale L. Voices from the field – Improving the nutritional health and well-being of women and young children. In: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2004:1-5. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/RysdaleANGps.pdf>. Accessed [insert date].

Copyright © 2004