

High in protein, low in fat and too good to be true

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Sydney Morning Herald, Op-Ed

April 7, 2006

Flawed logic, thanks to ambiguous nutrient claims, is governing our diets, writes Gyorgy Scrinis.

What is it the CSIRO Total Wellbeing Diet, McDonald's and Kellogg's Coco Pops have in common? They are all promoted on the basis of the nutrients they contain, rather than on the types of food, ingredients and additives they are made up of.

This focus on nutrients - instead of foods - has led to "nutrition confusion", which the food and diet industries have exploited to help market processed foods and fad diets that often are of questionable health benefit.

The meat-centred CSIRO diet, for example, is marketed primarily in terms of its macro-nutrient profile: high protein, moderate carbohydrates and low fat. Some of the new menu items at McDonald's are advertised as "97 per cent fat-free" or as containing "less than 10 grams of fat". And Kellogg's Coco Pops, which are more than one-third sugar, prominently promote the added vitamins and minerals.

Reducing food to its nutrient components could be called "nutritionism", and it has probably become the dominant way of thinking about food and health, and of constructing healthy diets.

The nutrition industry has implicitly, if not explicitly, promoted nutritionism by continually framing most research studies and dietary advice in terms of these chemical-nutrient categories.

The rise of nutritionism is clear in one of the well-known sayings promoted by the food industry and some nutritionists: "There is no such thing as good and bad foods, only good and bad diets." According to this argument, all types of foods, including junk food, have a place in a "balanced" diet. It promotes the idea that there are good and bad nutrients, such as good and bad cholesterol, good and bad fats and, for the advocates of the glycaemic index, good and bad carbohydrates.

Marketing foods and diets on the basis of their nutritional composition tends to take attention away from the quality and the type of foods being promoted.

Processed foods, for example, are often fortified with vitamins and minerals, or stripped of some of their fat, to enable such nutrient-content claims to be made. Nutrient claims on the labels of processed foods and drinks conceal the fact these foods are typically high in added fat, sugar, salt, chemical additives and reconstituted ingredients, and have often been stripped of a range of beneficial micro-nutrients and food components.

Fad weight-loss diets are also typically framed in terms of their macro-nutrient profiles (protein, fat and carbohydrates), rather than in terms of the foods these diets recommend.

The CSIRO diet, for example, is high in meat, with moderate fruit and vegetables, minimal grains and almost no processed foods, fast foods or sweets. The authors of the diet say it is the macro-nutrient profile - high-protein, moderate carbohydrates, low-fat - rather than the types and quantities of foods eaten, that accounts for how and why the diet "works".

The published results of their studies, however, support neither their claims that this diet works any better than others, nor that the macro-nutrient profile is superior.

To the extent that it does "work", it is likely to be due largely to the advice to consume fewer processed foods, drinks and sweets, and to reduce the quantity of food and kilojoules overall, rather than having anything to do with the macro-nutrient balance, or the meat content, of the diet per se.

The emphasis on quantifying nutrients contained in foods also tends to undermine the qualitative distinctions between foods that we really should emphasise. These include differentiating between plant-based and animal-based foods, and between wholefoods and processed foods.

Through the lens of this quantified nutritional analysis, processed foods can be presented as being healthier than wholefoods.

Margarine, for example, was for a long time - but no longer - considered better than butter, based on an analysis of the "good" and "bad" fats that each was thought to contain.

Similarly, the health benefits or hazards of eating animal-based foods as opposed to plant-based foods are reduced to questions of the quantities of nutrients they contain, such as protein or saturated fats.

On this basis, concerns over high meat and dairy consumption are turned into advice to eat "lean" meats and low-fat dairy products, rather than to simply eat fewer animal-based products overall.

An alternative to this reductive ideology of nutritionism is to refocus attention on the types and qualities of the foods we eat, rather than on their nutrient breakdown, particularly in the context of an increasingly processed and reconstituted food supply.

For nutritional and biochemical information to be truly useful, it needs to be subordinated to - and interpreted within - much broader frameworks for understanding and categorising foods and for constructing healthy diets.

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