

11TH EUROPEAN NUTRITION CONFERENCE

Diversity vs Globalization: a nutritional challenge for a changing Europe

(27TH October. FENS MADRID)

The speakers emphasised the following issues:

Keys and Grande Covián introduced the concept of Mediterranean Diet (MD) in the 1950s and, since then, an increasing number of epidemiological studies have evaluated the adherence to the MD in the world. These studies have revealed that Mediterranean populations are progressively drifting away from the MD pattern. From a FAO food balance sheets analysis, over the last 40 years, the Mediterranean European area had experienced the greatest decrease in adherence meanwhile other southern Mediterranean countries showed the highest adherence values during the whole period. However, countries in Northern Europe and some other countries around the world are taking on a Mediterranean-like dietary pattern.

Thus, the Mediterranean area is experiencing a 'westernisation' process of food habits due to the effects of globalisation and other socio-economic and lifestyle factors that threaten the adherence to the pattern, the landscapes, techniques and knowledge related to the MD. This is especially relevant considering that numerous epidemiological studies conducted in various countries provide scientific evidence that high adherence to a MD pattern is systematically associated with a markedly reduced risk for several chronic diseases (cardiovascular diseases, type II diabetes, metabolic syndrome, neurodegenerative disorders, some types of cancer and obesity and overweight) and, together with the regular practice of physical activity, is associated with a higher quality of life and life expectancy. Especially in comparison to a more westernized dietary pattern, with higher contribution in animal products and sugars.

Although the robustness of methodologies to assess the adherence to the MD pattern has to be improved with further reliability studies and consensus, results suggest that agricultural and health policy actions are urgently required to counteract dietary westernization and to preserve from the increasing erosion the healthy MD pattern with a cultural added value.

Because, in fact, the Mediterranean Diet should be understood not only as a set of food items but also as a culture model on ways of producing and elaborating food is an example of sustainability. The Mediterranean Diet – from the Greek word *díaita*, lifestyle – is a social practice based on a set of skills, knowledge, practices and traditions ranging from the landscape to the cuisine, which in the Mediterranean basin concern the crops, harvesting, fishing, conservation, processing, preparation and, particularly, consumption.

The changes in diet, reducing animal products and increasing vegetables, can not only produce benefits for human health and the overall use of land, but also can play a decisive role in the politics of climate change mitigation. Its cultural aspects need to be preserved to ensure its own sustainability as well as the cultivation and harvesting methods, hence the landscapes.

The climate change and other environmental issues, was commented that forces us to talk about sustainable diets. Sustainable diets are those diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to health life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources.

The landscapes express the close relation between the Mediterranean communities, their lands and their common sea. In this sense, Spain together with Italy, Greece and Morocco led the candidacy to have the Mediterranean Diet included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list. In November 2010, in a meeting held in Nairobi, Kenya, the Mediterranean Diet was included in the list and obliged to continue waging this recovery process and to promote our ancient food traditions in a prism of sustainability and commitment to the environment.

In this line, an Expert Committee from the Mediterranean Diet Foundation in collaboration with other institutions presented the new graphic representation of the Mediterranean Diet pyramid, conceived as a simplified main frame to be adapted to the different contexts of the Mediterranean region. Its semi-quantitative representation incorporates relative proportions and frequency of the Mediterranean Diet pattern food groups, as well as the concepts of seasonality and local products, physical activity, socialization and rest. With

this initiative, we hope to contribute to a much better adherence and preservation of the Mediterranean Diet.

The session ended up with a dynamic open discussion that contributed to raising the following issues:

- *The need to not globalize the Mediterranean Diet*, but put emphasis on the local, regional cultural values. The new pyramid is based on the latest scientific evidence in the field of nutrition and health published in hundreds of scientific articles in the last decades, contributing to the harmonization of the educational tools that are used in the promotion of the Mediterranean Diet, and responds to the need of a common main frame pyramid among the Mediterranean countries. However, should be *adapted to the specific realities of different countries or region* (e.g. portion sizes) *and variations of the dietary pattern related to the various geographical, socio-economic and cultural contexts of the Mediterranean area.*
- The UNESCO recognition leads to responsibilities but as well new possibilities in the road map of the Mediterranean Diet promotion. Mediterranean Diet and sustainability is one of the main topics to be further studied.
- Active measures to maintain and increase efforts of promoting the MD among citizens, especially children and youth was reinforced. Cooking lessons for children was pointed out as a way to start. An example was presented of a multidisciplinary promotion campaign focusing to promote the Mediterranean Diet at the South of France through sensitizing and educating teachers, individuals working in restaurants and the industry sector to improve the quality of the offer and a more informed demand.

The debate ended up on what have we done and where do we go from here.

More information on the event:

<http://www.fensmadrid2011.com/>