

Out of the Christmas Box



As I write, the shopping malls that service prosperous Brazilians are stocking up with sweltering Santas. Flyers for supermarkets are decorated with pictures of holly, fairy lights, balloons and Santas, and puff cut-price super-size Coke[®], beer, Nestlé Liquid Bliss[®] yoghurts, peaches in syrup, processed meats, *biscoitos recheados* (with creme fillings), Twix[®], Snickers[®] and the everlasting chemical *panetones* that middle-class wives present to their servants at Christmas, perhaps as a revenge for work badly done.

Yes, here in Brazil as in all 'market economies', we are loading up in preparation for an outsurge of *a barriga nacional* (the national belly) and our contribution to the global Yuletide eruption on a bovine scale, liable to knock some more stuffing out of the ozone layer. I here include some stories about what may be filling the stockings and the stomachs of children and their parents in Brazil and all over the world this Christmas.

School food wars

First some good news. Brazil's *Alimentação Escolar* programme stipulates that 70% of the food supplied to the 36 million children in the state school system be whole, fresh and locally sourced. The publicly funded budget for school food in Brazil is the equivalent of \$US 500 million a year. The programme is the joint responsibility of the ministries of agriculture, social development, education, health and foreign affairs. Here is an example of three-dimensional food and nutrition policy in practice. For in Brazil, schoolchildren are also taught about where food comes from; the benefits of food systems using few chemical inputs; and how to prepare and cook delicious wholesome food. Snack and drink vending machines and food industry propaganda are banned¹.

The news is that the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN) has identified the Brazilian school food system as a model for other countries. Henri Carsalade, a splendidly named FAO official, announced 'a new era of collaboration between the government of Brazil and FAO in support of other countries' nutrition, especially of schoolchildren'. Immediate support is pledged to Haiti, and to Angola, Mozambique and Cabo Verde, Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa².

Experience shows that progress in any public policies can be achieved only by assertive campaigning by non-government organisations backed by constant media coverage, with consistent support from socially responsible scientists and other specialists. By itself

evidence has no effect; and as recent events remind us, when politicians enact new policies, they are liable to ignore, suppress, pervert or invent evidence^{3,4}.

In recent decades the quality of food served in British schools, hospitals and other institutions has deteriorated. The reason has been obeisance to the linked doctrines of deregulation and privatisation. In 1980 one of the first acts of the Thatcher government removed any requirement for school meals to meet nutritional standards.

Evidence that children then were becoming increasingly fat and lethargic, doing less well in class, and becoming more vulnerable to chronic diseases later in life, was covered up⁵. British children have also become increasingly ignorant of where food comes from and unable to prepare and cook even the simplest dishes; and family meals have steadily become replaced by solitary eating and snacking of energy-dense pre-prepared foods and drinks relentlessly advertised on television.

In 1992 the Caroline Walker Trust (CWT), a British charity committed to the improvement of public health by means of good food, published an expert report proposing that the government's own nutritional recommendations should by law be applied to school meals⁶. In opposition, the Labour Party was committed to support this policy; when in government as from 1997, the promise was betrayed. Between 1992 and now, the proportion of British schoolchildren who are overweight or obese has doubled⁷.

School meals in England and Wales may now improve. The tipping point has been massive media coverage given to Jamie Oliver, a cheeky chappie 'celebrity chef' whose 2004 networked television series *Jamie's School Dinners* exposed the disgraceful policies of successive British governments and the disgusting quality of school meals, and converted millions of mothers into militants. Government then realised that nutrition and health can influence how citizens vote. We are told that, as from July 2006, vending machines for cola and other soft drinks, and junk snacks, will be banned inside schools, and budgets for school food and its provision will be increased sharply.

In early November the annual 'evening of celebration' organised by the CWT commemorated what seemed to be its eventual success. Referring to the announced coming ban on vending machines, Trust chair Joe Harvey said: 'I can't tell you how happy I am, thinking of the pain this will cause Nestlé and Coca-Cola'. However, in that same week, Tony Blair announced his commitment to further commercialisation of the education system. The best hope for British school meals may be regime change.

The crimson-coloured sausage

Back in Brazil, looking for stocking fillers, I find more reasons not to be cheerful. A little book for young children caught my eye in a local bookshop. One of a series, this one is *Colorir alimentos* – drawings of six model foods for children to colour, with help from their parents⁸. And the picture on the cover? A cheeseburger: soft bun with sesame seeds, sliced tomato, processed cheese and lettuce leaf. And the first exercise for tots eager to learn what's fun and good to eat in Brazil, inside? The same cheeseburger.

Turn over for the second model food – *cachorro quente*, the literal Portuguese translation of 'hot dog': long soft bun, fluorescent crimson sausage and an electric-yellow mustard twirly-whirly. Then, hot chocolate; then bright pink kiddieglop yoghurt; and then the one substantial dish that might be prepared at home: spaghetti with meat balls. Finally two fresh items: salad (some lettuce leaves and sliced tomato); and orange juice.

If these items were whizzed in a mixer and a sample chemically analysed, maybe half of the total calories would be from fats, and most of the residue from processed starches and sugars. None of the foods is distinctively Brazilian: the book could be copied from one produced in the USA – and maybe it is. Any sense of national culture, or of the seasons, or of the origins and life of food is obliterated.

From advertorials to megamagads

Now for Nestlé, and its marketing of products some of which will this year be gift-wrapped and stuffed into the Christmas stockings of hundreds of millions of children around the world. Bear with me first for some background. Everything I am about to describe is legitimate commercial practice, common to all major food and drink manufacturing companies.

My colleagues as successive heads of advertising at BBC Publications in London when once upon a time I was editor of *Radio Times*, even in those days of yore the BBC television programme guide, enjoyed the Christmas season. This was because our contribution to Yule holiday shopping mania was successive two-, four- or even eight-page advertisements for festive goodies.

In those days the reader could tell the difference between advertisements and editorial pages. Later came 'advertorials' – advertisements written and designed by staff journalists to look like editorial.

The next stage, devised by some industry marketing genius, is what I call 'magads': advertisement magazines with high production values, advertisements styled as editorial and more advertisements styled as advertisements. Newspapers and magazines with suitable market penetration are identified, and a deal agreed whereby the magad is inserted and distributed as part of the total package.

Readers should be able to tell the difference between a magad and, um, the real thing. But jumbo versions, which let's call 'megamagads', bulk out the total package, suggest better value and gain the aura of the selected periodical.

Also, they ensure that the editorial pages will be less likely ever to say unkind words about the industry and the products they are puffing. For imagine that you are a fearless and forthright woman's magazine editor, and you have commissioned an investigation into (say) the impact of formula feeds on infant and young child diseases and deaths in Africa. Now imagine that you are in a forward planning meeting with the publisher, during which your colleague the advertising director announces: 'We have a real chance of landing the magazine-within-our-magazine from formula manufacturer X'.

Would this be the time that you would proudly present the proofs of your investigation? Sorry to say, but I think that if you did, you might be out the door. The manufacturer who is offering the megamagad to magazines with appropriate atmospheres is of course blameless. The pressure is not in anything stated, it is in the situation. These are the realities of modern commercial publishing.

Dead presidents and liquid bliss

This brings me to Nestlé. Its star Latin American market is Brazil. In the first nine months of 2005, 'organic growth rose to 8.9 per cent, due to an acceleration in Brazil'⁹. This year Nestlé Brazil produced a 52-page megamagad *Faz Bem*, branded as all about nutrition and health, based on the company's global 'Good Food, Good Life' and 'Wellness, a Lifelong Choice' campaigns^{10,11}. I saw it because my Brazilian wife once worked as a nutrition professional at municipal level, and it was sent to her and presumably also to all the public and private nutritionists on Nestlé Brazil's mailing list.

It was inserted in the Brazilian editions of nine women-orientated consumer magazines: *Época*, *Quem Acontece*, *Marie Claire*, *Criativa*, *Crescer*, *Casa e Jardim*, *Monet*, *Galileu* and *Superguia Net*. Its total Brazilian print run is commercially confidential; at a guess, maybe something like 250 000. Nestlé's marketing strategy is of course global, so I guess that many millions of other-language equivalents of *Faz Bem* have been circulated. The global Nestlé 'Good Food, Good Life' campaign may well now be the most pervasive nutrition education in the world.

So what does it say? The cover-line asks 'where does well-being come from?' Inside, the Nestlé Literature Prize is summarised, with a picture of schoolchildren wearing *Nestlé Viagem pela Literatura* shirts. Nestlé's collaboration with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's public-private partnerships 'for the environment, good food, dignity and culture' is featured. A calendar of events 1876–2004 also suggests private-public links; thus '1984. Launch of *Líquido Bliss* yoghurt. Over a million people in São

Paulo demonstrate for a return to democratic government'. '1985. Launch of *Charge*, Nestlé chocolate with peanuts. Death of President-Elect Tancredo Neves'. And so on.

Half-page advertisements within the advertisement feature Nescafé® (and a story suggesting that Nestlé soluble coffee saved the Brazilian economy in the 1930s); Moça® condensed milk; Farinha Lactea® sugared cereal flakes, made up into *mingau* (pap) for Brazilian kids since 1876 (now 'source of iron and 11 vitamins'); Troppo Trufa® chocolate-flavoured ice cream, illustrated by a back view of two young lovers gazing out to sea; Nescau® chocolate and milk powder ('now with Actigen-E'); bottled meat and vegetable baby glop ('stage 2, after 6 months'); Neston® sort-of-sugared muesli mix; Ninho® milk powder formulated for children aged 1+, 3+ and 6+; Nutren Active® chocolate flavour sugared milk powder ('with exclusive Prebio'); and Friskies®, Beneful® and Purina Pro-Plan® pet chow. A page feature on 'ageing well', with a photograph including a grandpa with a big white moustache riding a racing bicycle, gets close to making medical claims for Nutren Active® sugared milk powder 'containing 26 vitamins, proteins, iron, calcium and Prebio 1'.

Nestlé is the biggest food manufacturer in the world, with sales in 2004 of around \$US 70 billion, and profits around \$US 5 billion, both likely to rise by around 6% in 2005. Its 247 000 employees worldwide can, according to Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Peter Brabeck-Letmathe, be multiplied up to a total of 4 million people dependent on Nestlé^{12,13}. The company has come a long way since Henri Nestlé developed his dried milk 'from good Swiss milk and bread, cooked after a new method of my invention, mixed in proportion, scientifically correct, so as to form a food which leaves nothing to be desired'¹⁴.

So what does *Faz Bem* say about nutrition, health and well-being? For Nestlé 'the art of living well' has six golden rules: consume adequate protein, fibre, calcium and iron, and moderate amounts of calories and fats. It goes on to explain that all foods are important, and that there are three types of nutrients: for ensuring that babies are born at the right weight and grow well, and for physical and mental development, of which the most important are proteins; for energy, of which the most important are carbohydrates; and for regulation, which is to say vitamins and minerals.

Physical activity is also recommended: there are photographs of beach volleyball, men abseiling down waterfalls promoting Nestlé Powerbar®, ecstatic female stretching (two of these, one repeated), walking, cycling, paddling (young couple and young son), skate boarding, more cycling (grandpa, companion, child), yoga, playing in a pool, as well as images of football and tennis.

Most Nestlé lead line products are energy-dense, sweetened or fatty. If the products featured in the *Faz Bem* Nestlé megmagad were unpackaged, slung in a cement mixer, turned into slurry and chemically analysed,

about half the calories might be from relatively highly saturated fats, and maybe a quarter from added sugars. Yet in the 52 pages I found no mention of saturated fats; or of sugars. Why?

Needed: a nutritional Greenpeace

Well, Cannon's Law of Product Puffery identifies an inverse relationship between the proportion of nutritionally dodgy ingredients of products and their manufacturers' enthusiasm for mentioning them in their own nutritional guidelines. Does the sausage industry support the World Health Organization dietary guidelines¹⁵ on saturated fat? No, it does not. Does the breakfast cereal industry emphasise that high salt consumption increases the risk of high blood pressure, stroke and stomach cancer?^{15,16} No, it does not.

There is no law against food manufacturers issuing dietary guidelines that distort modern knowledge and general agreement among disinterested scientists, as represented by UN agency and other expert reports. But there are sanctions. If a tax on obesogenic foods would be ineffective and cause dumping on poor countries, as recently argued¹⁷, at least governments could combine and agree an accord on the banning and restriction of media advertising and marketing of energy-dense sweet or fat products, especially to children. Organisers of nutrition congresses could state that they will accept support of any kind only from those industries who in their own publications endorse and amplify the scientific consensus as expressed in specified independent recommendations.

A global equivalent of Greenpeace could be made to work, combining the intelligence, knowledge and energy of campaigners and scientists, commanding media attention and advising governments, as has already been achieved in the field of infant and young child nutrition by the International Baby Food Action Network¹⁸.

But now? As far as I know, nothing. No comment. Are such massive initiatives as Nestlé's 'Good Food, Good Life' campaign of no interest to public health nutritionists – other, that is, from those who work for Nestlé? I pause, for a reply.

Barkering up the wrong tree

The hot ticket at the 18th International Congress on Nutrition (ICN) in Durban in September was for David Barker of Southampton University. His presentation on 'the Barker hypothesis' was positioned as a lunchtime sideshow. Even before he began to speak all seats were taken, and the Lion room was jammed with people sitting and also standing, lying and kneeling. I was reminded of the press enclosure at the 1969 Isle of Wight pop festival as we waited for the arrival of Bob Dylan.

David Barker, now FRS, won this year's prize donated by Groupe Danone, the giant French-based dairy

products, drinks and biscuit manufacturer, whose first nine months of 2005 sales are at an annual rate of well over €13 billion a year¹⁹.

The Danone ranges of kiddyglop sweetened yoghurts, 'fortified' with vitamins and now also with probiotic bacteria and other functional goodies, do a roaring trade. The Brazilian version, Danoninho[®], is pictured in the 2004 annual report above a headline 'preventing childhood obesity', and an accompanying article says that the cocktail of goodies in the product varies as a result of 'nutritional mapping' of different countries: added calcium in the USA, added vitamin D in Poland and added zinc in Brazil. So will Brazilian kids become galvanised into action? We will have to wait and see.

Franck Riboud, Danone CEO, whose torrid oratory at a previous Danone prize presentation in Acapulco greatly impressed me²⁰, stated his views about childhood obesity in the same report²¹. Obesity is a growing issue, he said, and it is also complicated. People are getting less physically active.

'The Barker hypothesis' on the foetal origins of adult disease, which now has almost overwhelming support, is summarised by Amartya Sen in his new book²². 'Low birth weight is often closely associated with higher incidence – many decades later – of a number of adult diseases, including hypertension, glucose intolerance and other cardiovascular hazards'. The implications for the feeding of babies and young children in Asia and Africa seem obvious. As Franck Riboud says²¹: 'There is also the question of promoting the healthy growth of children, especially in developing countries, as well as preventing deficiencies and boosting immunity'.

This could not possibly be why David Barker is the 2005 Danone Laureate, for two reasons. First, the distinguished panel from the Danone Foundation is independent and makes its choice solely on scientific merit. And second, Amartya Sen, in common with almost everybody who describes or promotes 'the Barker hypothesis', has got it wrong. Low birth weight is not in itself a cause of cardiovascular and other chronic diseases in later life. Were this so, diabetes, heart disease, the metabolic syndrome and you name it, would have been endemic in Asia and Africa for the last 10 000 years.

I had a corridor chat with David Barker at the ICN, on this point. Do you agree, I said, that the cause is not a single but a double insult: low birth weight (with all this implies), plus premature weaning on to energy-dense foods and drinks? And so that there are not one but two crucial factors: appropriate and adequate nourishment of the mother and of the child? Yes, he said. What this means, is that small and light babies have special need of exclusive breastfeeding to and beyond six months, weaning on to culturally appropriate nutrient-rich foods and drinks, and avoidance of fatty, sugary products that push physical growth and weight gain. These points are

not stressed in the publications of Danone, Nestlé and other transnational food and drink manufacturers.

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