

Title: "The role of fortified foods in children's health and development: Research and public policy in Latin America"

Presenter: Chessa Lutter, Ph.D.

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Summary: Caroline Johnston

On March 15, 2007, Dr. Chessa Lutter of the Pan American Health Organization gave a talk entitled "The role of fortified foods in children's health and development: Research and public policy in Latin America." The key nutritional problem in Latin America, where she has done most of her research, is the slowing of growth in height and weight, particularly "stunting," in the early years. Studies of the epidemiology of growth failure indicate that the main reason is iron deficiency anemia in infancy. Infants are at high risk of anemia due to their high iron needs relative to older children. Severe anemia has been found, in interaction with low SES, to have negative cognitive effects into adolescence.

In general, the diets of Latin American children in low SES areas do not meet official guidelines as set by organizations such as the World Health Organization. As Dr. Lutter explained, the process of urbanization means that now, more families buy their food rather than growing it. Thus, the commercial foods sector has an important role to play in ensuring prevention of anemia. Dr. Lutter and colleagues studied the effectiveness of various fortified products (e.g. mix-in powders) given out at well-child clinics. The products did have moderate effects on height, weight and motor development such as walking, by increasing iron levels.

Because the WHO and UNICEF recently opened the world market to makers of fortified children's foods, new corporate interests may not always align with those of the scientific community and of policy makers. Dr. Lutter concluded by discussing challenges and next steps. These include: proper marketing (e.g. building trust in high quality brands); ensuring adherence to international codes for fortified food quality; strengthening international regulations on food trade; improving links among this and other public health services and efforts (e.g. cooking sanitation education); as well as monitoring use at the level of individual families. She also argued that in Latin America, the practice of breastfeeding must be protected, and fortified foods should be seen as complementary.

Submitted by Caroline Johnston

Recommended readings:

Daelmans, B., Martines, J., & Saadeh, R. (Guest editors) (2003). *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*, Special issue based on a World Health Organization Expert Consultation on Complementary Feeding. Volume 24(1), The United Nations University.

Lutter, C. K., & Dewey, K. G. (2003). Proposed nutrient composition for fortified complementary foods. *Journal of Nutrition*, 133, 3011S-3020S.

Lutter, C. K., & Rivera, J. A. (2003). Nutritional status of infants and young children and characteristics of their diets. *Journal of Nutrition*, 133, 2941S-2949S.