

17 January 2001

Dr Bruntlund
Director General
World Health Organization
20, Avenue Appia
CH-1211 Geneve 27
Switzerland

Dear Dr Bruntlund

This is a personal appeal not on behalf of my place of employment, school of public health or my country. It is to ask why senior representatives of your organization are actively lobbying against food fortification in countries greatly in need a public health approach to the widespread public health problem of micronutrient deficiency conditions.

In the past week I have been informed of such from two places in which WHO representatives have argued strongly against food fortification. In one case, this was articulated in a most forceful fashion by the senior nutritionist of WHO European Region to an audience of health leaders in Chelyabinsk in Russia. This WHO representative pronounced that food fortification is, at best ineffective, and quite possibly harmful, and that all would be well if only everyone would eat a healthy diet. I am also informed that this viewpoint has been promoted by the nutritionist in WHO Middle Eastern region in an important country in the region. Surely WHO senior personnel are aware that eating a balanced diet to provide adequate levels of all needed micronutrients is virtually impossible in the conditions of Russia today and in the Middle East.

We are working hard in this area to develop food fortification to overcome iron, iodine, vitamin A and D, and folic acid deficiencies, for which we have considerable evidence. An Israeli-Palestinian Conference on this topic was held here in Jerusalem last January, with important international representation. A strong recommendation emerged to the ministers of health in the region to promote food fortification as one of the most effective ways of dealing with this important public health problem.

There is an apparent dissonance in representation of WHO policy. If the policy is unclear, perhaps it should be clarified. If there is staff discomfort with that policy, then it could be dealt with as a personnel problem. This is not a matter in which a clinical, individualistic approach is a suitable policy for WHO. The people of Chelyabinsk do not need to be harangued by a nutritionist representing WHO apparently lacking a public health approach on this vital topic when the nutrition situation in Russia is as grim as it is. Opposing food fortification with essential vitamins and minerals is the latter day equivalent of opposing pasteurization of milk or fluoridation of community water supplies.

As you know, micronutrient deficiency conditions are among the commonest public health problems in the world. WHO and its representatives, have a responsibility to lead on this subject and not obstruct progress based on outdated personal philosophies of nutritionists apparently unaware of, or opposed to WHO policies, or of the overwhelmingly strong case-for-action on this topic.

Again, this is purely a personal-professional request and does not represent any organization or country I am connected with. I am a public health professional with many years of experience in Canada, the United States, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza and elsewhere, with a strong concern for public health advancement. I have many publications in peer-reviewed journals, a recent textbook of public health (in both Russian and in English editions) and am a longstanding teacher of international students of public health.

I am copying this letter to Dr Danzon of WHO Euro Region and Prof. Osman Galal, Secretary General of the International Union Nutritional Sciences. I very much hope that this matter will interest you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours Sincerely,

TH Tulchinsky MD MPH
Associate Professor

Cc. Dr Danzon, WHO European Region, Copenhagen
Prof. Osman Galal, International Union of Nutritional Sciences