



THE EARLY NUTRITION PROGRAMMING PROJECT

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Acronym: EARNEST

**** Media Release ****

Wednesday 13th December 2006

‘TLC’ vital to combat obesity in children

The best of surgery, medical care and nutrition no substitute for time, love and care to combat obesity in children

As the best scientific brains of the EC-funded EARNEST Research Consortium working on nutrition science in pregnancy and early life meet in Cambridge to share scientific advances, one expert reflects that there is no substitute for tender loving care and time to ensure the optimal growth and health of children today.

“Research is increasing our knowledge of how important the mother’s diet is during pregnancy and baby’s first year of life in combating lifelong health problems such as obesity,” says Dr Margaret Ashwell, nutrition scientist and dissemination partner of the EARNEST Consortium (Cambridge, Wednesday 13th December 2006). “But without ‘TLC’ children will not necessarily thrive.”

Research work by the ‘Mother’ of nutrition science and Early Nutrition Programming, Dr Elsie Widdowson – the 100th anniversary of whose birth is being celebrated this week - demonstrated that to be effective the best of nutrition must be accompanied by the touch of ‘loving kindness’.

“Children in one orphanage in post-war Germany failed to grow and develop even when their diets were improved,” continues Dr Ashwell. “Further investigation by Dr Widdowson revealed that this was due to the house mother who continually scolded the children at meal-times. So although the improved meals were being consumed, the psychological trauma caused by this behaviour resulted in the children not growing as they should.”

“It is important for all of us involved in supporting parents and providing information to ensure the best start to lifelong health to remember the salutary lesson from Elsie’s research. Such support must be approached holistically to include an encouraging environment at mealtimes, physical activity as well as balanced nutrition, the latter being constantly refined by more evidence emerging from the EARNEST research consortium.

We would all agree that invasive surgery and medication regimes should be reserved for the most extreme of cases.”

The NICE Guidance on the treatment of Obesity in adults and children is being published on Wednesday 13 December 2006 and recommends invasive surgery and medication in the treatment of obese children.

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Notes for Editors:

1. Dr Elsie Widdowson – research work in Germany - in her own words: “It was one of the orphanages where we were making this bread experiment, but we were doing something else. I think we had finished the bread experiment and we made another study. We were going to measure the children’s heights – we measured their heights and weights and they were examined physically. They were going to live just on their German rations for six months and then for the other six months we would give them extra bread. They would have the sort of food they’d had in the other orphanages. But we had two homes so that one had the extra bread first, in the first six months. And what we found was that those in the home that were not having the extra bread gained weight and height faster than those in the other.

Well, then we switched them round and gave them the extra food in the other home: those children immediately stopped gaining weight so fast and the ones where they had not got the extra bread started gaining weight more rapidly. Well, this was very extraordinary because we couldn’t believe that extra food would stop them growing. So we looked into this a little bit more deeply. Well, you see, we’d been working in these homes and we had a nurse working closely in them and a dietician, and what we realised was that the house mother at the home where they’d gained weight badly in the first six months had been moved to the other home at the point when we changed the diets over. That was just chance. And she was a very unpleasant woman, always scolding the children at mealtimes. A very nice woman was in charge in the other homes when the children were gaining weight well. And we know the children ate the food because we had a dietician watching them all the time, but it was the psychological trauma that did this.

It was a very interesting story. And it’s been confirmed. It’s regarded as an experiment you could never design. It was just chance observation. But everybody agrees now that this was right and animals have shown the same thing.”

2. Dr Elsie Widdowson – the ‘Mother’ of Early Nutrition Programming – 2006 anniversary of her birth. Celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of Elsie Widdowson (1906 – 2000) pioneer of the study of how nutrition of the mother affects the growth of babies in the womb and their later development.

Elsie’s achievements:

- Proved that ‘TLC’ – tender loving care - as important as actual diet to growth of children
- Shaped war-time rationing to ensure health & fitness
- Achieved compulsory fortification of bread with calcium
- Wrote and updated the ‘Bible’ on the composition of food on which today’s nutrition science is based
- Most highly honoured woman in Science, awarded the Companion of Honour

Elsie and Cambridge:

- Moved to Barrington (6 miles from Cambridge) with her parents in 1938 and stayed until her death in 2000
- Research work based in Cambridge

- Medical Research Council (MRC) Nutrition Unit established in Cambridge
- Elsie Widdowson Research Laboratory established at MRC

3. Early Nutrition Programming

What is it?

The science of understanding how and why the food eaten by pregnant women and by baby in infancy affects the life-long health of the child

What do we know already?

Nutrition in the womb and infancy and birth-weight implicated in up to 50% of adult disease - heart disease, diabetes, obesity, bone health, impaired immune & gut functions

What's happening in Cambridge?

- Celebration of the life and work of Dr Elsie Widdowson (Wed 13 Dec) as part of the Nutrition Society Annual Meeting
- Gathering of Nutrition Scientists & Practitioners from the UK & Europe (Thurs/Fri 14/15 Dec) to share and discuss Early Nutrition Programming latest developments within the EARNEST network, an EC funded integrated research programme.

- 4. The EARNEST Research Consortium** (The Early Nutrition Programming Project ENPP) funded by the European Commission brings together a multi-disciplinary team of scientists from European research institutions in an integrated programme of work including experimental studies in humans, modern prospective observational studies; and mechanistic animal work including physiological studies, cell culture models and molecular techniques. The ENPP consortium consists of a multi-disciplinary team of 40 partners (33 academic institutions, 3 industry, 4 small/medium-sized enterprises) in 17 EU countries with a coordinating centre in Munich. The project commenced in April 2005 and runs for 5 years. Detailed briefing paper available on request.

EARNEST's first scientific congress will be held in Budapest 20/21st April 2007 -

www.metabolic-programming.org

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