

EARNEST general assembly meeting held in Cambridge, UK on December 14th and 15th 2006

This meeting was superbly organised by Kathy Kennedy and the rest of the team from partner UCLON who are based in London. The timing and venue of the meeting were arranged to coincide with an important meeting being held a few days before by the UK Nutrition Society. This meeting celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Dr Elsie Widdowson, who is generally regarded as one of the early pioneers of the subject of Early Nutrition Programming; several EARNEST participants attended both meetings.

The GA was an exciting meeting, mainly because it was the first time that participants could hear some of the early results from the EARNEST project as well as having time for their Theme discussion meetings and digesting all the information in posters on show.

Professor Guido Moro from Milan showed some Theme 1 results. A mixture of prebiotic oligosaccharides (GOS/FOS) based on the those in human milk, fed to newborn babies, has a bifidogenic effect, plays a role in prevention of allergy, reduces the incidence of infections and strengthens in a natural way the infant's natural defences.

Dr Tamas Decsi summarised some Theme 4 results on a comparison across five European countries. Policy documents include some statements on programming effects, but these are not always supported by reference to the evidence-base. Most of them did not specify the importance of an appropriate nutrition for long long-term health consequences. Professional associations should improve the quality of nutritional recommendations by focusing on rules of evidence-based based medicine and the potential role of early nutrition in preventing various chronic diseases at later stages of life should be more effectively emphasised in future policy documents.

Niels Straub presented the results from Theme 5 on the economic implications of an Early Nutrition Programming on blood pressure in later life. Implications of shifts in the risk distribution were related to risk of morbidity/mortality and put into an economic model which included the identification of relevant costs: direct healthcare costs, direct non-healthcare costs and indirect costs. A cost benefit of LCPUFA enhanced formula was demonstrated over standard formula, but it would take 50 years for this to become apparent. Breast feeding was of course the preferred model from an economic viewpoint as well as a health stance.

Apart from these, and other, interim results from other Themes, the GA was treated to some excellent general presentations.

Prof Harry McCardle alerted EARNEST partners to a wonderful opportunity that exists through his Institute's membership of the EU NUGO project. The Rowett

will provide support and assistance in microarray generation and analysis for EARNEST partners. He urged his colleagues to make the most of this offer.

Dr Isabelle Froidmont Goertz, our EARNEST desk officer in Brussels, reminded EARNEST participants of the opportunities that are just about to become available under the new Framework 7 programme. She saw many opportunities for offshoots from EARNEST to become successful FP7 projects; the first call would be made in early 2007.

EARNEST Participants have to grapple with finance as well as science and so the presentation by Jill Elliot, an auditor who acts for partner UCLON among others, was particularly welcome. Her main advice was the need to keep accurate timesheets and receipts to ensure transparency at all times.

The dissemination and exploitation panel (DECP) were meeting for the first time within this GA meeting and so two Panel members were asked to tell us about their own expertise so the other EARNEST participants could see how this would help the whole project.

Professor Frank Furedi spoke about the complexity of understanding consumer thinking. He drew analogies with other early interventions eg vaccinations. Early enthusiasm for the benefits of vaccination has now given way to some misgivings among some groups. Even the concept of breast feeding vs. bottle feeding is complex and related to issues apart from the scientific benefits. Advocates of breast feeding take the moral high ground whereas advocates of bottle feeding believe they are more sophisticated because the mothers are not slaves to their child. Any research project must identify gaps, identify messages, identify channels and identify means of transferring the information.

Dr Lena Grimm then gave advice, particularly to the academic partners, on spotting and protecting possible intellectual property (IP) opportunities within their results. It is important to be careful with dissemination of results if IP rights are to be protected. This advice was timely as the general air of the meeting was one of enthusiasm for a project which is just starting to yield results.