Report of the Brussels Progress Meeting- April 2006

The third meeting of the Early Nutrition Programming Project General Assembly was held in Brussels and was efficiently organised by Dr Clotilde Carlier and her team from Université Libre de Bruxelles Childrens' Hospital. We were all very impressed that Clotilde had managed to find time to fit in giving birth to a son, Charles, while she was so busy organising the conference. The group enjoyed staying close to the Grande Place and being able to nip out and sample the local beers so easily.

Professor Kolezko welcomed everybody to the meeting, now one year into the project. He drew attention to the Annual Report that would have to be submitted to the EU very soon and encouraged everybody to list their publications on the internal website. Some themes were much better at this than others……

As suggested at the last progress meeting, much more of the time was taken up with cross theme sessions devoted to the topics that each theme is addressing from their different perspectives. One of the major strengths of the project is the opportunity for bringing together researchers who are addressing the consequences of Early Nutrition Programming using different experimental approaches and promoting interaction and collaboration between them. These cross-theme sessions helped to further these aims. There were sessions on Obesity; Neurology and Psychology; Cardiovascular diseases and updates on the studies being carried out in the Gambia and Belarus. The session on Cardiovascular Diseases for example, ranged from a detailed discussion of the possible critical windows of developmental plasticity and programming mechanisms in rat models of human hypertension to a discussion of how many deaths from cardiovascular diseases could potentially be prevented if all infant formulas were supplemented with long chain PUFA through reductions in blood pressure in later life.

The project involves people from 16 European countries with all the various cultural and language differences which would be expected but surprisingly one of the main cultural differences is that between those doing work on animals and those whose work is in people. Animal work, particularly work on small animals like rats and mice, proceeds much more quickly than studies in people and produces results and publications more rapidly. Scientific questions can be addressed directly rather than through observational studies which see what happens to people over time. Those working with people find it hard sometimes to understand how animal models of human disease apply to people. To address these areas of potential misunderstanding, a workshop on the validity of the animal models used in the project has been proposed.

The first afternoon was devoted to individual theme meetings and useful discussions on the nitty gritty aspects of ensuring that studies are comparable and how data would be shared . A guided poster session and a session on some recent results were held to help disseminate the findings coming out of the different themes. The EU contact for the project, Isabelle de Froidmont-Görtz, spoke about the forthcoming Framework 7 research programme and gave more details about the review procedure. Professor Wim Saris, from the Diogenes project, spoke about his experiences of managing another large integrated project. Dr Susan Ozane gave a warm and moving tribute to her long term mentor and colleague and one of the first authors in the field of early nutrition programming, Professor Nick Hales, who died last year.

Two training workshops were held directly after the meeting. These were on Anthropometry, led by Professor Chumlea from the World Health Organisation, for those involved in studies measuring growth in children; and on Media Training. The Media Training workshop was led by project partners, Rhonda Smith and Marc Catchpole. Their special invitee was BBC health journalist Geoff Watts and, together, they helped eight young scientists from across the project to understand the mind of the media.