



What are you being served?

How the science underpinning practice, policy and advice arrives on your plate.

Workshop Report by Ben Cottam

Expert-led discussion workshop organised by Newton's Apple, The Biochemical Society and the Food Standards agency as part of the BA Festival of Science on the 9th September 2008.

- Gill Fine (Director of Consumer Choice and Dietary Health, FSA)
- Tom Sanders (Professor of Nutritional Sciences)
- David Curry MP
- Philip Chamberlain (arable farmer)

Each of the panellists was interviewed by Alok Jha, science correspondent for the Guardian newspaper.



Gill Fine was interviewed first and highlighted the work done by the FSA on increasing the general public's awareness of nutritional issues through the 'traffic light' system of food labelling and the '5 a day' campaign. She drew particular attention to the need to inform consumers as to how their daily intake of nutrients is calculated – highlighting the fact that, on average, over 75% of a person's salt intake is through manufactured foods (such as bread), rather than added by themselves. It was agreed that more needs to be done to ensure that the food industry is held accountable for what they put in their products, and that the acceptable standards are met.



Tom Sanders was then asked to give an overview of his particular area of expertise – fats. He explained the difference between the 'unhealthy' saturated fats (present in meats and butter) and the 'healthy' polyunsaturated fats (present in oily fish and cheese). Despite accepting the need for clear, simple packaging on food, he was critical of the traffic light system, saying that it was the total number of calories consumed which is the more important factor in determining the chances of obesity or food related illnesses.



The complicated mechanisms by which scientific evidence, public opinion and the views of lobby groups are all taken into account when Parliament makes decisions on food policy were then discussed by **David Curry MP**. He stressed the need for rational debates on issues such as organic food and

genetically modified crops. He pointed out that Lobby groups against the latter are dissuading

biotech industries from carrying out their research in the UK. Finally, he said that the Government should let people take more responsibility for the food they eat and highlight the virtues of a healthy lifestyle, rather than impose regulations on them.

As the last person to be interviewed, the farmer **Philip Chamberlain** explained how he uses Science and technology to optimise his use of land to grow food crops. He provided the

audience with an insight into the rules and regulations surrounding the production of food crops in the UK. He pointed out that the policies derived from scientific research (as well as the public, supermarkets and environmental lobby groups) have a large impact of modern farming techniques. From the type and amount of pesticides used and the design of agricultural equipment to the acceptable height of hedgerows and when fertiliser is spread onto the fields - science plays an important role.



The panel then came together and questions were invited from the audience, including:

Q) What group has the largest affect on food policy?

A) **TS** – Without doubt the general public. However, ultimately price, taste, convenience and ethical concerns were usually higher priorities than health issues when people chose which foods to buy.

Q) How much salt should I add to my food to make sure I am getting enough?

A) **GF** – The recommended amount is 6 g per day, and most people will get this amount through the salt content in the manufactured food they eat. There is no need to add lots of salt to your meals, only to taste.



Q) How true are the claims by the manufacturers of Probiotic drinks that they improve our health and immune systems?

A) **TS** – Generally these claims are true and there has been extensive scientific research carried out by the manufacturers. But, be cautious and do your own investigation if you're not sure.

Q) Are the current regulations holding back farmers and preventing best practice?

A) **PC** – Almost certainly. Many regulations that come to force are the result of knee-jerk responses to complaints by consumer and lobby groups, and of misinterpretation of scientific evidence by policy makers.

In his summing up of the event, Alok Jha called for a more even-handed approach when food policies are made and said that it is the consumer, through the shops and supermarkets that has the ultimate power to change their eating habits and the policies affecting farming and the manufacture of food.