

Sir Liam Donaldson, CMO
Department of Health
Room 114
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
London SW1A 2NS



28 June 2007

Dear Sir Liam,

Re: SACN response to the *Health is Global: Proposals for a UK government-wide strategy consultation*.

The Committee thanks you for an opportunity to comment on the UK government strategy proposals launched in the *Health is Global* report and congratulates you for highlighting the role of UK government in addressing global health issues.

SACN welcomes your recognition of the importance of global health promotion but believes that the prevention and treatment of malnutrition requires much greater emphasis. It will be central to the achievement of several UN Millennium Development Goals, most obviously the eradication of poverty and hunger and reduction in child mortality, but others too.

As paragraph 2.2.3 of the report points out, malnutrition is directly or indirectly responsible for approximately 50% of deaths in young children and is a major contributor to the burden of disease in the developing world. However poor nutrition is not confined to developing countries, nor just a feature of conflict as implied elsewhere. It is a global problem, which co-exists with population movement and migration. Countries in economic transition are at particular risk. Even in the UK, as the National Diet and Nutrition Surveys illustrate, micronutrient deficiencies affect young children and women of child bearing age.

Nutrition is key to the achievement of a child's developmental potential. Malnutrition exerts its most damaging effects during pregnancy and in the first two years of a child's life. This adversely affects physical growth, brain development and, ultimately, human capital formation. It affects a child's chances of performing well at school and has intergenerational consequences. Girls chronically malnourished through childhood and adolescence will be less well equipped to enter pregnancy thus perpetuating the cycle of low birth weight and stunting.

Improved nutrition drives stronger economic growth. Whilst this is briefly acknowledged in chapter 4 of your report we think, again, that more emphasis is justified. The World Bank report¹ states "*Malnutrition slows economic growth and perpetuates poverty through three routes - direct losses in productivity from poor physical status; indirect losses from poor cognitive function and deficits in schooling; and losses owing to increased health care costs*". Nutrition programmes in the past have been low priority for government. Invariably, there are multiple stakeholders and problems may be addressed in a piece-meal fashion. Thus there is a need for a holistic approach and strategic leadership with engagement of development partners. Gross malnutrition is visible and reactive action is taken but the marginal nutrient

¹ The World Bank (2006) *Repositioning Nutrition as Central to Development – A Strategy for large-scale action. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development*

deficiencies usually remain invisible to malnourished families and communities and this can impact on morbidity and population health as a whole.


Strong evidence indicates that nutritional interventions need to be delivered in the earliest years of a child's life². The window of greatest opportunity for addressing malnutrition extends from before conception until two years of age. Despite the common perception that food production and availability are the only limiting factors in countries where malnutrition is widespread, other contributing factors include inadequate knowledge about the benefits of exclusive breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices, and the lack of time women have available for appropriate infant care practices and their own care during pregnancy. Interventions, which include regular personal contact with health care workers supporting and advising families seem most effective though may be less attractive to some funding agencies than more technological solutions. A clear governmental strategy for such interventions is thus required, committing resources to adequate education and training alongside delivery.

Nutrition needs to take a central place in the development strategy of governments so that the full range of economic and social improvements can be realised. Whilst direct relief in the form of food aid may in some instances be important, access to food is often not the only issue. The food needs of children age 0 to 18 months are relatively small and yet child undernutrition seems to coexist with obesity in many households and communities, a phenomenon which has been termed the "double burden" of malnutrition³.

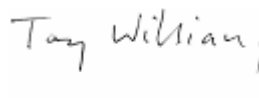
The UK has many important contributions to make to the global endeavour for promoting child health and reducing child mortality through effective strategies and support to countries where malnutrition is common. These include both direct measures (such as the provision of food and personal support) and indirect ones, particularly those relating to trade, agricultural productivity and gender equality. In relation to the former we would like to emphasise the appropriate training of professionals in prevention and management of severe malnutrition as vital. Whilst it is an area in which particular expertise has evolved within UK academic centres there is an urgent need to disseminate knowledge and build skills much more widely both at home and abroad.

As you are aware, the Committee provides scientific advice on all aspects of Nutrition to the UK government and will be pleased to contribute its expertise in International Nutrition and support UK's efforts in promoting global health.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Alan A Jackson
Chair of the Scientific Advisory
Committee on Nutrition (SACN)



Dr Anthony F Williams
Chair of the Subgroup on Maternal
and Child Nutrition (SMCN)

² Engle PL *et al.* (2007) Child development in developing countries 3: Strategies to avoid the loss of developmental potential in more than 200 million children in the developing world. *The Lancet* 369, 229-242

³ Davidson F (2002) Nutrition and Health. In *Nutrition: A Foundation for Development*, Geneva: ACC/SCN