



The Vegetarian Diet Comes of Age

Scholars from around the world gather at Loma Linda University for the Third International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition.

by Rosemary Clandos

IN MARCH OF 1997, MORE THAN 600 PEOPLE from 33 different countries attended the Third International Congress on Vegetarian Nutrition, held on the campus of Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California. Authorities from universities around the world—including Oxford University, the University of London, Harvard University, and the Universities of Minnesota and North Carolina—gathered to share their latest research findings.

Zeno Gintner, Ph.D., nutritionist and member of the executive board of the Hungarian League Against Cancer, arrived from Hungary wanting to hear “the truth.” The old communist government had warned that a vegetarian diet was dangerous.

Solveig Tonstad, an R.N. and self-avowed skeptic from Norway, came to find “serious, updated research.”

Rosemary Clandos, a health writer for Loma Linda University, attended Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Her syndicated nutrition column appears in newspapers across the country, and she frequently writes for the San Bernardino County Medical Society Journal.

Johanes Mamahit, M.P.H., health and temperance director of the West Indonesia Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists, was grateful to be at Loma Linda University, but was “not completely convinced that a vegetarian diet is necessary for a healthy life.”

The keynote speaker, Walter Willett, Ph.D., chair of the department of nutrition at Harvard School of Public Health, noted that the “evidence accumulated in the past decade has emphasized the importance of adequate consumption of the beneficial dietary factors, rather than just the avoidance of harmful factors.” He then took advocacy of vegetarianism to a new level, explaining that a non-meat diet not only avoided harm, but yielded measurable benefits.

He expressed surprise at the outcome of some of his own research. He had expected, he said, to find a strong correlation between fat intake and breast cancer, but found none. Also, his observations of certain health benefits associated with intakes of fish and poultry led him to suspect that these foods contain components that are not consumed in optimal

amounts in other diets. Willett emphasized the need for further research.

Skeptics—particularly non-vegetarian skeptics—breathed sighs of relief. In a culture used to the cacophony of hard sell, Willett's objectivity was welcome, and lent credibility to his address.

During the next three days, more than 30 speakers, under the direction of Dr. Patricia Johnston, associate dean of the Loma Linda University School of Public Health and chair of the congress, presented their research findings. They showed how proper nutrition can prevent disease and help with the management of chronic illness.

Mark Messina, Ph.D., nutrition consultant at Nutrition Matters, Inc., Port Townsend, Washington, reported on his recent data that suggest that phytochemicals found in soybeans and legumes may reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and some forms of cancer, as well as promote good bone health. According to Messina, the extremely low glycemic index of beans suggests that legumes may be a particularly important food for diabetics and those at risk of becoming insulin resistant.

Lee Lipenthal, M.D., vice-president and medical director of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute in Sausalito, California, explained why the current dietary guidelines of the American Heart Association may not be sufficient to stop the progression of coronary heart disease. Regression of the disease may occur when dietary intake of fat and cholesterol are much lower. Since cholesterol is contained only in foods of animal origin, a vegetarian diet may be extremely beneficial.

Richard Hubbard, Ph.D., professor of pathology at Loma Linda University School of Medicine, offered surprising, favorable news for victims of Parkinson's disease. His research findings showed that eating a vegan diet (one that contains no animal products—meat, eggs, or dairy products) could reduce symptoms of Parkinson's and lower by 50 percent the

amount of L-dopa medication needed. Furthermore, Hubbard reported that plant protein can be eaten during the day, whereas animal protein is normally restricted until evening because it interferes with the dopa absorption.

Johanna Dwyer, D.Sc., R.D., director of the Frances Stern Nutrition Center at the New England Medical Center and professor at Tufts University, offered a modulating tone, warning the group against triumphalism and excessive assurance that our own views, dietary or other, are forever correct. Dwyer advised people to resist inflicting "dietary imperialism" on friends and acquaintances, and stressed the importance of maintaining an open mind and healthy skepticism.

Several pioneers of vegetarianism received awards at the congress. By helping the scientific community maintain open minds to the value of a vegetarian diet, these researchers made great advances in the study of good nutrition.

One of the recipients, Mervyn Hardinge, was a doctoral student in public health in the 1940s when he chose to investigate the health status of vegetarians for his doctoral dissertation. The dean of the Loma Linda University School of Medicine at that time feared the church would be embarrassed if the vegetarian diet was found deficient, and demanded that Hardinge select another topic. Hardinge refused, defying the administration, and continued his research. He eventually defended his dissertation and was awarded a Dr.Ph. When his findings were published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*, they drew national attention. Hardinge later went on to become dean of the school of public health at Loma Linda University, and director of the health department of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Another award recipient, Dr. U. D. Register, found, a decade later in the 1950s, that his

advocacy of the vegetarian lifestyle was still not universally welcomed on the Loma Linda campus. Many of the medical faculty were hostile, and Register found that debate accomplished little. He turned to research, realizing, he said, that “you can’t talk back to a rat.” He made it his task to change the American Dietetic Association’s negative view of the vegetarian diet and its proponents. His knowledge and expertise brought him wide recognition, and in 1969 he was invited to participate in the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health. In 1974, he was chosen to write the statement on vegetarian diets for the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences.

For those with the necessary training in medicine and science, the congress offered an array of technical information and research findings. For the less technically minded, Joan Sabaté, M.D., Dr.P.H., associate professor and chairman of the nutrition department, at Loma Linda University School of Public Health, introduced the vegetarian food pyramid, which proved to be a highlight of the congress. Intended to serve as a visual guide for adults, the pyramid was prepared with input from vegans, vegetarians, and omnivores. It is unique because, unlike the U.S. Department of Agriculture food guide, whole grains and legumes occupy the largest block, meats are omitted, and eggs and dairy products are optional.

Application workshops, designed to ease the transition from theory to practice, drew large crowds. Presenters like Chrystal Whitten, M.S., R.D., assistant professor of nutrition and dietetics, and Ardis Beckner, M.S., R.D., C.L.E., certified diabetes instructor and nutrition specialist/metabolic dietician, both from Loma Linda University, offered practical advice on retraining patients who must change their eating habits in order to manage disease.

Chrystal Whitten recommended that people

change their diet gradually. Give patients choices and allow them to have as much control as possible. When they don’t want to eat meat, offer them dairy products or nuts. “Focus on the specific benefits of eating healthful foods rather than avoiding certain foods,” Whitten suggested. “Plan ahead. Encourage continual, incremental changes.”

As the congress drew to a close, participants—many laden with lecture notes and resource materials—were uniformly enthusiastic. Dr. David Noga, a surgeon from the Ukraine, was grateful for information he plans to use in fighting the startlingly high rates of heart disease in his country. Half of all Ukrainian men die of heart disease before the age of 62, thanks, in part, to a high intake of lard. “I am also taking home the preventive medicine model of the vegetarian diet,” Noga added, “to help increase the immunity of the people who were affected by the Chernobyl radiation accident.”

Lucrecia Ponce, a registered nurse and native of Jujuy, the smallest city in Argentina, went home with renewed confidence. “The exercise and the diet of Coyos Indians,” she said, “which already includes many grains, legumes, and vegetables, is 100 percent better than the [typical] Western diet for preventing disease.”

Clearly, vegetarianism—which the general public once identified as a religious practice, and Adventists dismissed as another of their peculiar foibles—has earned the respect of science. Frood Bourbour, Ph.D., returned to his post as professor of epidemiology at the University of Tehran, in Iran, with plans to use the information he had gotten about the treatment of diabetes with soy beans and the role of soy beans in cancer prevention. In parting, he offered a sort of symbolic benediction on the Adventist health message: He would return home, he said, “with the determination to follow the Adventist vegetarian diet, and,” he added, with good humor, “with a headache from caffeine withdrawal.”