New Users of Nutrient Databases

Introduction

Carol T. Windham
Utah State University

One-hundred years ago, Dr. W.O. Atwater first published proximate data and energy values for selected American foods. Thus began a process that set the stage for the science of nutrition and foods that emerged, developed and diversified during the 20th century.

Today, that science is a focus of discussion and debate that will continue into the future of our society. The fact that you are here today indicates that the science of foods and nutrients has an important role in our future. Otherwise you, as new scientists, would not be spending your time at this meeting to learn the fundamentals of nutrient composition data bases.

That is the task for this afternoon - to orient you to the basics of food data and data systems:

- What are nutrient data?
- What are data bases?
- Where do you find the data?
- How do you talk about them?
- How do you evaluate data?
- How do you judge data base systems?
- How do you use nutrient data appropriately?
- How do you determine what you need for your purposes?

And finally

- Where do you go during this conference to get additional information you need?

We can only lay a foundation for you this afternoon. But you should know that we are able to do this because of the vision, commitment and hard work of scientists who have followed Dr. Atwater's lead. These scientist have spent long hours at the lab bench, in staff meetings, at computer terminals, and at conferences like this one sharing accomplishments and frustrations with colleagues. They have given us not only data, but also measurement systems, sampling strategies, standards, nomenclature, instrumentation and computer access.

These scientists deserve more credit than they sometimes receive - not just for what they do, but for what they enable others of us to do. We don't just generate and codify data - we use them. We use the data to develop better food production and distribution systems for national and global allocation of foods. We use the data to monitor nutritional status of our population so that we can target people in our societies who are at risk for nutrient-related problems. We use the data to fight those diseases - not only deficiency diseases, but diseases of excess. We use the data to elucidate the mechanisms of those diseases so that we can change their course or circumvent environmental or genetic influences. We use the data to develop regulations for a safe and nutritious food supply. And, because we believe that people in our society have the right to make informed decisions, we put the data right on the foods we eat so that any person reading a label in the supermarket can plan the nutritional content of his or her next meal.

These are just some of the larger issues for you to keep in mind today as we lead you through the details of information and sequences of tasks to introduce you to the components and uses of nutrient databases.