

# Snooping into the Diary of

Having managed to get her hands on the diary, **Ursula Arens** reveals the insights and learnings of these two nutrition pioneers

**R**eading another's private diary is not nice. Much less, sharing details with others. Much less, going to print.

But getting the chance to read the diary of nutrition researchers **Elsie Widdowson** and **Robert 'Mac' McCance** is too tempting. The notes give amazing insight into early nutrition science, made compelling by the private commentary of two extraordinary researchers.

The diary is a cardboard notebook for Spring 1946, when they travelled to Holland and Germany to plan research projects. Entries were alternate, shared between Elsie and Mac, and when reading the neat and detailed notes, the two 'voices' soon become distinct for their slightly different styles.

## What did they write about?

The topics are mostly descriptions of went-here; went-there, but there are many delightful barbed observations. Of great interest to dietitians, are constant descriptions of what-we-had-to-eat. Mac seems to have been mostly abstemious during the day, but required a huge evening meal, which he usually complained was 'nowhere near enough.' Elsie enjoyed any foods at any time, and seemed ever curious to try local fare. Astonishing were the 'of-their-time' food descriptions. Fried liver or kippers, and toast-and-marmalade for breakfast. Eggs were always described as shell-egg or more usually not (meaning the much inferior powdered egg products.). And bread was the star-food.

Mac writes that a Dutch academic host, "Knowing that we were interested in bread. . . collected for our delectation all the many kinds of bread that Holland could provide. It was a kind thought in these days of bread rationing. I was sorry not to be able to do better justice to the spread, but Elsie was magnificent."

## Insights into the post-war period

It was the bleak period of post-war, and Mac had managed to persuade the Medical Research Council (MRC) to fund nutrition research in Germany to study what effect stringent rationing and food shortages had had on the civilian population. The six-week trip started via Holland, and involved visits to six German towns, to find somewhere with suitable laboratory systems, and supportive staff.

The last town, Wuppertal, offered all of these, and best of all, a bi-cultural and bi-lingual doctor, Dorothy Rosenbaum, who was desperate to be part of the research. One proposed project, for example, was examination of changes in the composition of lean

body mass during under nutrition: why some subjects got oedema, and others didn't?

## What were Germans eating in 1946?

Elsie often made notes from talking to food-queuing 'very thin' women. What did they weigh? One diary entry reports mean weights of a sample of twelve women at 103lbs; 47kg. The mean weights of five husbands was 112lbs; 51kg. Elsie comments acerbically, "In contrast . . . are the shop-keepers, especially the butcher. He looked fat and blooming and well."

Diets were calculated to provide about 1700kcal per day for patients or prisoners; free-living civilian

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rations were only 1000kcal per day on the assumption that many would access foods in other ways, which unfortunately was not always the case.

Potatoes were a rare luxury, and the main starchy foods (other than very meagre rations of bread), were swedes and turnips. You could choose meat rations as bone-in, or 25% less by weight for boneless product – most fought for bone-in cuts, to flavour soups. Fatty meat was the most popular cut, but Elsie notes this was in short supply. Sausages were an alternative to meat, and available in two grades; smaller amounts for quality or more as worst wursts.

In addition, people queued for hours for sausage-water (in which sausages had been boiled), as a soup base. What was described as Worcester sauce was actually watered vinegar. Elsie reported that everyone she spoke to was so ravenous, that they ate their rations as soon as they got them, leaving bleak periods of complete hunger for many days before the next coupons became valid.

## "We need food"

Mac went on many ward visits to observe the different stages of severe under nutrition, and made selections for closer examination. The reward for cooperation was



# McCance and Widdowson

a cigarette. "Their gratitude is terrific," said Mac. The German medics were keen to help Elsie and Mac, but could often not help reveal their sceptical thoughts: "We don't need advice or guidance on food. We need food."

Mac and Elsie returned to England, and the last diary entry was on 22nd April. After travel by ferry from Denmark, Mac considered the choice between a first-class train via London, or a third-class train direct to Cambridge; he chose the latter, as he was obviously desperate to get home again.

Funding for the research was approved by the MRC, and what should have been a six-month project, actually took more than two years, completed in 1949. The project included Elsie's amazing orphanage study, showing the surprising influence of 'kindness' as a factor in growth in children.

The four publications issued from the nutrition research in Wuppertal were:

■ **McCance RA.** *The History, Significance and Aetiology of Hunger Oedema. Studies of undernutrition in Wuppertal, 1946-9.* Medical Research Council Special Report Series No 275. London: HMSO, 1951, 21-82



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■ **Widdowson EM.** *The response to unlimited food. Studies of undernutrition, Wuppertal 1946-49.* Medical Research Council Special Report Series No 275. London: HMSO, 1951, 313-345

■ **McCance RA, Widdowson EM.** *Famine. Postgrad Med Journal* 1951, 27: 268-277

■ **Widdowson EM.** *Mental contentment and physical growth. Lancet* 1951, I: 1316-1318

The diaries of Mac and Elsie are a delightful insight into the lives and thoughts of two of Britain's greatest nutrition scientists. Of course, their achievements are great. But what struck me most was their poignant descriptions of human frailties and confusions and contradictions: which of course are still very much a part of research today.

*Note: The diary was kindly loaned to me by Dr Margaret Ashwell. She hopes it might be placed on public display very soon.*

