

**Response to:**

**The Welsh Food Debate**  
**Quality of Food**  
**Key Consultation Questions**

**By Dr Matthew Cole, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2007**

*Do you agree with the three ethical principles? [“Well-being, justice, accountability”]*

I would like to see a fourth ethical principle: **Compassion**. A nutritious and healthful food system is about treating ourselves with compassion in terms of what we put into our bodies. Although I am opposed to the farming of animals for human food on (compassionate) principle, if animals are to be farmed, compassion applies to them too, not least in respect of the food that is provided for them. It makes no sense to argue for healthy human food if at least some of it is derived from animals who are poorly fed. Compassion also obviously applies to the conditions that farmed animals are kept in. A system of accountability ought explicitly to address public rights of inspection of slaughterhouses, transportation systems, factory and other types of farms, animal breeding practices, etc. Compassion also relates to the way we treat the environment. Living lightly on the earth is the most rational, because preventative rather than curative, approach to ensuring a safe and non toxic environment for us all (human and nonhuman). Moving towards a plant based diet would reduce our dependence on intensive forms of agriculture that store up environmental problems of pollution, soil degradation and greenhouse gas emissions. As is now well documented (see the UN FAO report *Livestock’s Long Shadow*), livestock farming is a major contributor to global warming and a range of other environmental problems.

*Do you agree with the seven priority issues for food quality in Wales? [“Health, safety, environment, fair trade, economic viability, accessibility and affordability, culture”]*

Although in broad agreement with the 7 priorities, the perspective of nonhuman animals is absent. The health, safety and environment of nonhuman animals, especially farmed animals, ought to be a priority as well. This could be addressed either through making the position of nonhuman animals more explicit in respect of each priority, or through proposing an additional priority issue specifically on the effects on nonhuman animals of the human food system. I would recommend including the perspective of a representative of the new political party Animals Count in future consultations in order to develop this further: <http://www.animalscount.org/>

On ‘Health’ – some explicit acknowledgement of research evidence linking consumption of animal products to chronic degenerative disease ought to be

made – there is abundant evidence on this (especially but not only in relation to colon cancer, breast cancer, prostate cancer, heart disease, type 2 diabetes) and concomitantly the protective effects of increased consumption of plant foods

On ‘Safety’ – food poisoning is in most cases related to animal foods, or contamination of other foods with animal faecal matter. The risk is also directly increased by intensive animal farming, which encourages spread of infection and cross-contamination during slaughter and processing. Educating the public on safe cooking methods ought not to be a substitute for targeting the primary cause of unsafe food: intensive animal farming.

On ‘Environment’ – I am in broad agreement with this section except that it does not make explicit that animal farming is most responsible for ALL of these problems – this really needs to be confronted head on if any progress is to be made. Also, mention ought to be made of the effect of pollutants on nonhuman animal health – e.g. wild bird populations. Breaking the link between horticulture and animal farming can be facilitated by a shift towards vegan-organic methods of horticulture (i.e. organic plant growing without use of animal by-products including manure). For more information, see <http://www.veganorganic.net/>

On ‘Fair Trade’ – I’m glad to see mention of animal welfare, but it ought to be pointed out that the surest gains to be made in animal welfare are from ceasing to farm them for human use, especially in intensive systems.

On ‘Economic Viability’ – intensive animal farming is intensive in respect of its use of energy to run machinery, produce food for the animals, transport animals to slaughter, process and package those animals, refrigeration costs of animal products, energy use in cooking them and on; chemicals used in producing animal feed (pesticides, herbicides, fungicides); drugs to cure animal diseases caused by cramped conditions; the amount of pollution caused (greenhouse gases, pollution from excreta, ammonia, etc). Many of these costs are hidden by subsidies and the fact that hidden costs (like pollution and ill health) are passed on to government agencies (not least the NHS) and consumers. But it is NOT intensive in terms of use of human labour. A switch of emphasis towards organic plant food production instead provides greater opportunity for employment and healthier less resource intensive food.

On ‘Accessibility and Affordability’ – unhealthy foods (i.e. heavy in animal fats, low in micronutrients such as minerals, vitamins, phytonutrients) should not be provided by institutional caterers such as hospitals, schools, care homes, prisons and so on. On a recent visit to a hospital canteen I was

appalled to see most people’s plates loaded with ‘beige’ food: chips, pasties, pies, gravy – and no colourful vegetables. A key educational message can be communicated by not *providing unhealthy* foods at the same time as *promoting healthy* foods – encouraging people to eat more fruit, veg and

other plant foods at the same time as serving up chips and pies in a hospital will only produce confusion and cynicism.

On 'Culture' – the same point as for 'A and A' could be made on not communicating mixed messages on healthy foods. It is also likely that many consumers would be appalled to know the truth of the extent of animal suffering involved in intensive animal farming methods – there is a desperate need for an education campaign on this to enable an increase in public pressure to end factory farming. The higher price of meat and dairy that would result needs to be balanced by re-prioritizing plant food production through subsidy of farmers, pressure on supermarkets to discount plant foods instead of animal foods, etc, so that a shift to a healthier diet would incur no increase in cost for consumers in their overall food budgets.

*Do you agree with the challenges and gaps identified?*

**Primary production:** Agri-food strategy – this needs to be articulated with the issue of fruit and vegetable production – i.e. there needs to be a large scale shift from animal farming to horticulture. Issues of human and nonhuman animal health and environmental well-being cannot be seriously addressed without tackling this issue head on.

CAP strategy: I welcome the focus on prioritizing fruit & veg over animal products – but 'high fat' animal products is only part of the issue – there is compelling evidence that animal protein has harmful effects on human health, not just animal fat (notably the role of casein from cow's milk in respect of breast cancer). The issue of food safety is also relevant here, as already discussed.

In general, this section says nothing about what has been achieved in terms of improving animal welfare, reducing animal suffering, moving towards reducing the numbers of animals farmed and so on.

**Processing & manufacturing:** most of the issues addressed in this section can be ameliorated by shifting towards greater use of freshly prepared produce. Fresh veg requires less salt and other additives (such as fats, colouring and so on) to be flavourful and appealing to the eye. The priority ought to be minimizing processing to that which is needed to ensure food safety, with an emphasis on encouraging freshly prepared meals in all sectors wherever possible. The important 'added value' of any food system ought to be the healthfulness and enjoyment of the food, not profit for business. The comment on minimum protein values in vegetarian options suggests an outdated approach to vegetarian nutrition. The use of beans, pulses, nuts, or soy derivatives (such as tofu, soya 'milk' or 'cheese') in veggie meals negates any need for concern for protein deficiency – a 'problem' which is virtually non-existent among Western vegetarian or vegan populations.

**Retailing:** a compulsory and universal labelling scheme for nutrition and health would be welcome, but would only ever be a curative substitute for the preferred option of ceasing manufacture of unhealthy foods high in animal fats and proteins, salt and so on.

The same point goes for caterers – being rewarded for providing healthy food is a bit of a nonsense – healthy food should be the automatic default expected from every food provider in every sector, with penalties for providers of unhealthy and unsafe foods.

**Provenance:** an honest assessment of the provenance of red meat such as beef and lamb ought to include: the origin of the foods fed to the animals killed to provide that meat; the conditions of those animals at every stage of their lives up to and including the moment of slaughter; as well as of the processing of their carcasses post mortem.

**Purchasing:** In general, the facilitation of healthy consumer choices comes from the elimination of unhealthy choices from the marketplace – the choice should be between different kinds of healthy foods, not dietary toxins and dietary nutrients. In the particular case of the Healthy Start initiative, vouchers ought to be exchangeable for foods other than animal milks for vegan parents and children, with that option open to all parents. The view that nonhuman animal milks are healthy foods for human children is highly contestable. No other species than human beings regularly consumes milk after weaning, and no other species than human beings regularly consumes the milk of another species at any stage of life.

**Food preparation:** in addition to the initiatives identified, some attention ought to be paid to the issue of time poverty, and the interaction of this with financial poverty: low levels of wages contribute to increased need to work long hours, taking away time and energy to source and prepare meals with fresh ingredients.

**Waste:** again, a reduction in the scale of production of processed and highly packaged foods, an increase in the preparation of meals from fresh ingredients, a decrease in the amount of animal foods consumed, can all contribute to a reduction in food waste.

**Education:** The Vegan Society provides a free guide for hospital and care home caterers in respect of providing for vegans. They will also provide ongoing information and support on request (<http://www.vegansociety.com/images/HospitalCateringBooklet.pdf>). They also have a new CD ROM available free to schools on all aspects of veganism, as well as offering a range of educational resources for teachers tied into to different aspects of the curriculum. They also train a network of school speakers on veganism (who are available to speak on veganism in schools free of charge). More information at:

[http://www.vegansociety.com/html/people/lifestyle/families/kids\\_zone/education.php](http://www.vegansociety.com/html/people/lifestyle/families/kids_zone/education.php)

These resources are of use not just in terms of addressing diversity issues in ensuring vegans are well provided for, but can also enhance the provision of healthy and nutritious food for all service users/consumers as well as increasing knowledge about healthy eating and increasing understanding about cooking plant-based meals (and thereby reducing intake of animal fats and so on even among non-vegans).

The Vegetarian and Vegan Foundation offer free membership to healthcare professionals, as well as free samples of a range of fact sheets, guides and reports on veggie/vegan nutrition and health:

<http://www.vegetarian.org.uk/shop/hcp.shtml>

*Please list your top ten priority actions for improving the quality of food in Wales in order of priority.*

1. Reduce production and consumption of animal products; increase production and consumption of plant foods.
2. Redirect subsidies to (preferably vegan-organic) horticulture and away from animal farming. Support farmers who make a transition in this direction.
3. Bring the well-being of nonhuman animals into the centre of Welsh food policy – in terms of the effects of farming on farmed and companion animals (as consumers as well as producers of food) as well as wild animals in terms of the environmental impacts of the human food system on their health and habitats.
4. Enforcing healthy standards among state food providers – to include the banning of ‘junk’ foods in state-run food outlets (e.g. no chips or meat pies in hospital canteens!)
5. An education/publicity campaign to raise awareness of the conditions of farmed animals in Wales at all stages of their lives.
6. Compulsory teaching of cookery in schools to increase knowledge of how to prepare meals from fresh ingredients – especially fresh fruit and veg. This must include practical cookery skills.
7. The inclusion of vegan cooking and nutrition on all catering training and education programmes.