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Dr H de Haen
Assistant Director-General
Economic and Social Department
FAO
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00100 Rome
ITALY

Dear Dr de Haen

Re: **FAO statement on Sugar**

I am writing to reinforce the concern expressed by myself, Professor Este Vorster of the University of Potchefstroom, South Africa, and Professor J I Mann of the University of Otago, New Zealand, in a letter to Dr Lupien in December 1997.

I was surprised to see the document prepared by Mr William D Clay of the Food and Nutrition Division of FAO for the Fiji FAO 1997 Asia Pacific Sugar Conference entitled "Is Sugar Pure White and Deadly?". The central message of the document is that there is a myth about sugar, which concerns its association in people's minds with obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, micronutrient deficiencies, hyperactivity in children, dental caries, etc., but which has now been dispelled as the result of an FAO/WHO Consultation on Carbohydrates and that therefore sugar should be rehabilitated as an important nutrient. Particularly worrying is the suggestion early on in the introduction to the document that chronic undernutrition in developing countries might be mitigated by increasing sugar consumption. This seems to be a completely inappropriate nutrition strategy.

The Joint FAO/WHO Expert Consultation on Carbohydrates which took place in Rome in April 1997 was in many ways very successful. After much discussion, during which we were aware of various sectional interests, we achieved consensus on a number of major issues. If the recommendations of the Consultation are carried out then this could prove to be a turning point for both the perception and practise of carbohydrate nutrition in the world. Mr Clay however has misinterpreted the tone of the document if he believes it was a vindication of the role of sugar in the diet. To the contrary, we were at pains at the Consultation to identify dietary carbohydrates as a group of related compounds with widely varying physiological and health benefits. Sugar was not selected as being especially healthy, and does not merit being singled out in this way in an FAO nutrition strategy document.

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12 JAN 1998

Medical Research Council and the University of Cambridge

There are questions which remain to be asked about the safety and health benefits of sugar and these are particularly important in the developing world. The rapidly rising prevalence of obesity in many of these countries raises major questions about diet since these populations are almost universally eating what would be considered in the West to be low fat diets. The role of increasing sugar intakes in these populations must be considered a possible aetiological factor and, at this stage, this is an important problem which we pointed out in the Expert Consultation and clearly requires further research. Until there are some conclusions from that research it seems unwise to suggest that sugar could fulfil an important nutritional role in these developing countries.

The sugar industry lobbies persistently and very effectively at all levels both nationally and internationally. It would of course not be doing its job were it not to pursue this policy. However, recent research studies of dietary carbohydrates have shown clearly that many of the indigenous foods available in developing countries offer the optimum mixture of carbohydrates and that the promotion of an adequate supply of these locally grown foods might prove to be the best policy for healthy nutrition in these countries. Certainly, until the question of the cause of obesity is identified in developing countries, the promotion of a single carbohydrate source such as sugar should be done so only with the greatest caution.

I hope you therefore understand my concerns in this matter and other aspects which were covered in the joint letter from Professors Vorster, Mann and myself earlier. The Expert Consultation on Carbohydrate was an extremely valuable exercise and we look forward to seeing the document, which we agreed in Rome, published and made widely available and used as the basis for FAO and WHO policy in this area.

Yours sincerely



Dr J H Cummings

cc: Professor Mann
Professor Vorster