

Sir Robert McCarrison

Sir Robert McCarrison (1878 - 1960) MA, MD, DSc, LLD, FRCP qualified in Medicine at Queen's College, Belfast in 1900. He joined the Indian Medical Service and was posted as Medical Officer to Indian troops guarding the mountainous Northern Frontiers. His research there on the cause of goitre won widespread recognition and in 1913 he was promoted to do research. In 1928 he became Director of Nutritional Research in India.

His researches were extensive; they included work on the newly discovered vitamins and on the contrasting disease patterns in the Indian subcontinent. He demonstrated how many common diseases increasingly prevalent in industrial societies were caused simply by diets made defective by extensive processing, often with the use of chemical additives. He deplored the universal consumption in Britain and America of refined white flour, instead of wholewheat flour, and the substitution of canned, preserved and artificially sweetened products for fresh natural food.

McCarrison's work was widely published in the medical press. He was honoured for his discoveries, but completely ignored by government and the medical profession at a time when medical thought was absorbed in the study of disease rather than on prevention and the promotion of health.

The Promotion of Health and the Prevention of Disease

Food should be as close as possible to its natural state and grown on healthy soils. It should be eaten fresh.

Cereals, starches and sugars: Refining robs these foods of important nutrients and of their fibre. It also leads to unnatural concentration, partial in the case of wheat but total for refined sugar. In order that these foods should be as near their natural state as possible, they should be eaten unrefined, as wholewheat flour or unpolished rice. Naturally sweet foods like raisins, figs or other fruits rather than refined sugar should satisfy a desire for sweetness.

Fats: According to McCarrison's thesis, natural fats as part of a varied diet are not harmful to human health. Milk, butter and cheese or cold-pressed vegetable oils are thus preferred to over-processed oils and margarines. McCarrison repeatedly emphasized the value of whole milk and eggs in human diet.

Meat: When reared in natural conditions, meat, poultry, fish and game are valuable sources of nourishment; but the record of good health, stamina and fine physique of certain peoples of Northern India led McCarrison to conclude that a high intake of meat as a source of protein was not necessary. Lack of land for pasture did not allow these peoples the luxury of meat; this did not matter provided a plentiful supply of milk products were available.

Soil: From carefully controlled feeding trials, using laboratory animals, McCarrison concluded that food grown on soil fertilized by cattle manure had better nutritive value than when soluble chemicals were used. Thus the quality of food depends on the way it is grown.

I know of nothing so potent in maintaining good health in laboratory animals as perfectly constituted food; I know nothing so potent in producing ill-health as improperly constituted food. This, too, is the experience of stock breeders. Is man an exception to a rule so universally applicable to the higher animals?

- *McCarrison*