

HSRC puts nutrition on menu

UNDER-NUTRITION is just as much of a health challenge in South Africa as obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure, and now more answers about the link between social factors and nutrition are expected, thanks to a new specialist centre attached to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC).

The Centre for the Study of the Social and Environmental Determinants of Nutrition, launched by Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi in Cape Town last month, is expected to add an important new dimension to the research-rich culture of the HSRC.

HSRC chief executive Dr Olive Shisana says it will be well-placed to become an important tool for research leading to policy recommendations to improve the nutritional status of South Africans and understanding the mechanisms that link social factors to nutrition.

Professor Demetré Labadarios, head of the new centre, says better understanding of nutrition at the molecular level, on its own, is inadequate to understand the underlying causes of the increasing prevalence of obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases of lifestyle.

What is perhaps of greater interest, and complexity, he suggests, is the "inadequate success or, at times, major failure in our interventions to combat the ills of



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under- and over-nutrition".

Unicef makes a distinction between under-nutrition and malnutrition, saying that malnutrition is a broad term which also technically refers to over-nutrition.

The UN Children's Fund says under-nutrition contributes to the deaths of about 5.6 million children younger than five in the developing world every year. It can lead to poor school performance and dropout, threatens the future ability of girls to bear healthy children, and perpetuates a generational cycle of poverty.

What occurs when people are under-nourished, Unicef explains, is that they can no longer maintain natural bodily capacities, such as growth, resisting infection and recovering from disease, learning and physical work, and pregnancy and lactation in women.



CHALLENGE: Almost 1.5 million children in KwaZulu-Natal rely on school feeding schemes for daily nutrition. Nearly 200 million children in poor countries have stunted growth because of insufficient nutrition, according to a new report published by Unicef.

The new South African centre, the HSRC says, has been established with the aim of investigating the integration of the molecular and social aspects of nutrition, with a view to enhancing the quality of life of South Africans through excellence in nutrition research, and its dissemination.

The HSRC says it will undertake innovative and collaborative

research into the social and environmental factors of nutrition.

Other objectives of the division are to serve as a resource centre with specialist knowledge of African diets and foods, but also as an important contributor to training, and personal and professional growth for scientists.

So what are the projects in the pipeline?

The HSRC said in a statement the centre had laid the foundations to undertake several projects, including the SA National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, a national survey repeated over time, which addresses health, nutritional status, emerging disease patterns in relation to nutrition, risk behaviours, and the social and environmental determinants of nutrition.

This would offer an excellent opportunity to assess how well social grants assist with the food security of these groups.

Food security is the subject of a separate project addressing the social and environmental factors that influence the kind of food South Africans eat, and where they buy their food.

This study, says Labadarios, is expected to provide information that may highlight the co-existence of obesity and micronutrient deficiencies in the same household.

Another focus will be on the Modelling of the Epidemiologic Transition Survey, a four-year, multi-country study taking in Cape Town, Ghana, Jamaica, the Seychelles and the US.

It is aimed at comparing the metabolism equivalence of African women, and looking at the Westernisation of diets from the perspective of developed and developing countries.