MINUTES OF THE MEETING ON THE DEFINITION OF THE TRADITIONAL MEDITERRANEAN DIET

In the context of the MEDDIET 2004 International Conference
21-22/04/2004, Athens, Greece

Attendants:

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Giovanni de Gaetano: University Cattolica, Italy
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Miguel Martinez-Gonzalez: University of Navarra, Spain
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Minutes kept by Antonia Trichopoulou and Effie Vasilopoulou

The meeting was a continuation of a previous meeting held in Barcelona¹ (in the framework of the Foundation for the Advancement of the Mediterranean Diet 2004 V International Mediterranean Diet Congress ) in the context of which the necessity emerged for further discussion on two important issues related to the Mediterranean diet. Specifically:

1. The establishment of a common definition of the traditional Mediterranean diet, at national and European level, in order for all Mediterranean countries to present a common perspective.

2. The establishment of a common policy (possibly backed by an umbrella organization) that will protect the common definition and will cover scattered activities on the Mediterranean Diet.

The intense scientific activity of the last decades has significantly contributed to the understanding of the relationship between nutrition and health. The health benefits of the dietary traditions of the Mediterranean populations, have contributed to the acceptance of the Mediterranean Diet as a healthy dietary model.

Traditional dietary patterns have changed in the Mediterranean region as meat consumption is rapidly increasing and intake of pulses is rapidly decreasing.

All Mediterranean countries are called to join forces and present a united approach for the benefit of the Mediterranean region. MD is an important logo and should be used properly by qualified persons and organizations.

Implementation of the above positions includes the development of nutritional policies for the general population (e.g. guidelines based on the definition), as well as industry and food and agricultural policies.
Points that were discussed:

1. The need for immediate action.
2. The definition of the MD
3. The role of physical activity.
4. The components of the traditional Mediterranean diet
5. The classification of nuts
6. The quantification of components.
7. The shape of the figure depicting dietary guidelines.
8. The actions that need to be taken.
9. The establishment of an “umbrella” approach.

Conclusions that were reached:

1. The need for a common definition has become even more imperative since the logo of Mediterranean diet is used widely and quite often without much attention in addition, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) intends to establish nutrition guidelines for northern and southern EU countries. Therefore there is need for action in order for Mediterranean countries to present a common position.

2. Since Greece is the only European country with official nutritional guidelines, it was agreed that the Greek guidelines are to serve as the background document for the development of the common definition of the traditional Mediterranean diet. The Greek guidelines will be sent to all the involved scientists for comments, amendments, changes and additions. They will be sent back to the University of Athens, where all comments will be combined and resent for approval. The deadline for receiving the modified guidelines will be July 10th, and the deadline for the circulation of the integrated draft text will be July 25th.

3. It was proposed that one of the sessions of the forthcoming Forum of Mediterranean Food Cultures meeting should be dedicated to the common definition of the traditional Mediterranean diet.

4. It was agreed that the definition should refer to the traditional Mediterranean Diet preserving cultural inheritance.

5. It was agreed that the common MD definition will serve as a nucleus, and from there on will allow for various variants due to regional, cultural, agricultural or religious differences.

6. It was agreed that accumulating evidence in support of a specific food item with a beneficial health effect e.g. olive oil, renders the specific food a core and non substitutable element in the definition of the Mediterranean Diet.

7. It was agreed that the definition should include not only what is the Mediterranean diet, but also what is not the Mediterranean diet, protecting the traditional Mediterranean diet logo.
8. The ancient Greek word “diaita” means equilibrium, lifestyle. Therefore, the traditional Mediterranean diet is more than just a diet; it is a whole lifestyle pattern with physical activity playing an important role.

9. Since nuts consumption is relatively high in Mediterranean countries, the issue of including nuts as a separate component was discussed. However, the lack of data on nuts consumption, which is commonly classified together with fruit, should be taken into account. The same applies to olives, the consumption which is also quite high in many Mediterranean countries.

10. It was agreed to present the main features of the traditional Mediterranean diet in the form of a Decalogue, as presented below:

1. Olive oil as added lipid
2. Daily consumption of vegetables
3. Daily consumption of fruits
4. Daily consumption of unrefined cereals
5. Bi-weekly consumption of legumes,
6. Nuts and olives as snacks
7. Bi-weekly consumption of fish
8. Daily consumption of cheese or yogurt
9. Monthly or weekly consumption of meat or meat products
10. Daily moderate consumption of wine, if it is accepted by religion and social ground

11. The main characteristics of the traditional Mediterranean diet are depicted in the MD pyramid which accompanies guidelines. The elements of wine consumption and daily physical activity are both presented on the outer side of the pyramid. Therefore, it was suggested that moderate wine consumption, which is a main feature of several Mediterranean countries, should be noted with an asterisk in the pyramid and in the text. A paragraph should be added to the text of the guidelines and in the picture of the pyramid which notes that moderate wine consumption is not applicable for religious purposes for several Mediterranean countries.

12. The issue of including quantification of servings or portion sizes in the common definition was discussed, since the wording high, low or moderate consumption is quite relative. However, since the documentation of servings or portion sizes is a time consuming procedure and need for immediate action prevails, it was decided to proceed and complete the issue of the traditional Mediterranean diet common definition as a first step. Then, the definition of quantities will follow as a second step, possibly in the context of the MEDITERRA project if approved for funding. Based on the common definition, guidelines with a quantitative approach will be developed.

13. It was agreed not to include recommendations in the guidelines or reference to specific nutrient.

14. The thought of nutrition guidelines depicted through a different shape than the pyramid was discussed. This issue was raised because many consumers are confused believing that the top of the pyramid equals to the best, while in fact it equals to the worse. However, since the use of the classic pyramid is not a random choice but was
motivated following a costly survey that was conducted 20 years ago in the USA indicating that the pyramid is the best way for the public to perceive nutritional information and given the fact that throughout the years the classic pyramid has become a position for nutritional education, it was decided to stick to the pyramid shape.

15. It was agreed that the following actions need to be taken by the attendants in order to achieve the first goal:

a) Decide the components of the common traditional Mediterranean diet definition
b) Decide the components that do not represent the common MD definition
c) Develop a text and adapt it, strengthening the role of physical activity
d) Discuss patterns of consumption notably alcohol consumption
e) Collect signatures and publicize in a scientific publication as a declaration
f) Develop common guidelines based on the traditional Mediterranean diet, for which there is evidence for important health effects, and promote through ministries.

16. Traditional Mediterranean diet besides health implications also has cultural and economic implications. Therefore it was agreed that all MD countries will have to agree and contribute after the development of the draft. As a starting point, it was agreed to expand from the Greek background document and then include all Mediterranean countries.

17. Over the last 10 years the number of conferences, meetings and research projects related to the Mediterranean Diet has increased enormously and there is a need for coordination, possibly through a website. Instead of observing different Mediterranean diet activities repeating themselves, they should share common targets. On the other hand, since globalization is a non-stopping process and mass catering could facilitate the production and promotion of traditional foods, there is a necessity to work closely with the food industry and develop a consortium of SMEs of traditional foods to join forces in a common cause. A MD umbrella would bring together SMEs in addition to scientists and provide a clearer and more focused approach on the knowledge and implications of the MD.

18. Although the scientific community will comprehend and agree with the development of a traditional Mediterranean diet consortium, the food industry may have different targets, since it involves additional stakeholders. Therefore, rational common objectives should be developed and pursued.

19. It was suggested that the Foundation for the Advancement of the Mediterranean Diet would be considered appropriate to act as coordinator of the consortium. The consortium will operate on established rules and it was agreed that the first and most significant rule is the transparency of financial resources and interests.