

A. Introduction

With the aim to improve health and related information available in the EU Member States and to develop and improve systems of data collection, a programme of Community action on health monitoring was set up in 1997. The objective of the programme was to contribute to the establishment of a Community Health Monitoring System, which makes it possible to:

- measure health status, trends and determinants throughout the Community
- facilitate the planning, monitoring and evaluation of Community programmes and action;
- provide Member States with appropriate health information to make comparisons and support their national health policies.

Monitoring dietary patterns are among the prime contributions of nutritional science in the nutritional epidemiology development, the formulation of dietary recommendations, in the planning and implementing national food, nutrition and agricultural policies. Currently, international comparisons of dietary exposures are mostly based on food rather than nutrient intake. The lack of compatibility of food composition data from various countries (1) and findings that, in several instances, food components act synergistically to exert their effects lead to an expansion of current research towards studying patterns of food intake (2, 3, 4).

The food data used for international comparisons are often derived from: a) food balance sheets (FBS), providing information on food supply at the population level b) household budget Surveys (HBS), which collect data on food availability within a nationally representative sample of households and c) specifically designed individual nutrition surveys (INS), providing information on the food-intake of free-living individuals, over a specified time period. The FBS data are useful when conducting comparisons on the adequacy of food supply and for following over time crude dietary changes. The individual surveys, when intakes of the subject are recorded as adequately as possible, are expected to provide evidence on the food quantities consumed. Nevertheless, when international comparisons are undertaken, the

differences in study design and analysis of the various surveys reduce the comparability of the results (5).

Comparable between countries information on food availability can be provided by data collected in the HBS. The HBS can be thought of occupying a position between the FBS and the INS. Like food balance sheets, the HBS allow between country comparisons at a regular basis but, moving from total population to household level, the HBS can provide a more detailed description of the dietary choices of the population, as well as of population sub-groups (6).

The DAFNE initiative

The DAFNE initiative aims at creating a cost-effective European databank, based on the food, socio-economic and demographic data from nationally representative HBS (7).

Since 1987, the National Nutrition Center in Athens, Greece, has organized a series of workshops, seminars, and pilot research projects aiming at the development of the most appropriate way of using food and related data from Household Budget Surveys. In 1993-94, this approach was granted financial support by the European Commission through the DAFNE I and II projects which, upon conclusion, provided a food database with comparable HBS data from 10 European countries (8,9). After the development of the DAFNE databank and in an attempt to better understand the limitations of the HBS data and on how we should deal with them, the work undertaken in the context of the DAFNE initiative was aiming at comparing data from HBS, retrieved from the DAFNE databank, with data from INS (the FAIR-97-3096 project: "Compatibility of the household and individual nutrition surveys in Europe and disparities in food habits"). Comparisons of the HBS and INS data for 4 European countries showed that household budget and specially designed nutrition surveys are, given the limitations present in both, comparable (10). Thus, the DAFNE databank can serve as a tool for the identification of disparities in food habits among European countries and their socio-demographic determinants.

The DAFNE III project

The “European Food Availability Databank based on Household Budget Surveys – DAFNE III” project was aiming at updating the DAFNE databank, by including additional datasets from six already participating European countries (Belgium, Greece, Norway, Republic of Ireland, Spain and the United Kingdom) and also by integrating several HBS datasets (collected in consequent time periods in each country) from France, Italy and Portugal.

The thus developed databank can serve as a tool for:

- The follow-up of trends in nutritional practices, based on comparable and regularly updated information
- The identification of population sub-groups whose dietary habits are not favorable according to the current scientific knowledge on the association of diet and health and
- The outlining of preventive interventions in order to support consumer choices towards a healthy nutrition.

The ultimately developed databank was designed to be integrated in the European Union Public Health Information Network (EUPHIN) of the European Commission and potentially to other information systems, providing thus a cost-effective nutrition monitoring tool.

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