



Editorial

Reflections on water

Ironies abound in this world—in politics, diplomacy, religion, economics, human rights, sports, fashion, and nutrition. Water features in one of those nutrition ironies. It is, arguably, the most important food on the planet. Why is it then that so few food composition tables have data on the composition of drinking water? Where's drinking water in food pyramids? In many dietary guidelines and goals, water is relegated to the fine print or only mentioned in the context of consuming less soft drink. Exceptions include the South African dietary guidelines, which state “Drink lots of clean, safe water,” and the Greek pyramid with a footnote, “Also remember to drink plenty of water.” Mostly, though, water is not mentioned. Maybe we just take it for granted.

Fortunately, not everyone takes water for granted. The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the year 2003 as the International Year of Freshwater.¹ The resolution encourages Governments, the United Nations system and all other actors to increase awareness of the importance of sustainable freshwater use, management and protection. Drinking water is at the top of the list.

Water is kind of an oddity. It is a chemically defined molecule that we measure in all foods, yet it is also a food in itself. From the tap, and from sources other than factories where it is distilled and deionized, it has a nutrient profile just as other foods do. In some countries, inorganics in the local water supply provide a nutritionally significant contribution to dietary intakes. In this issue of the Journal, Miller-Ihli et al. highlight fluoride in municipal water supplies around the USA. While fluoride was the focus of the report, the discussion and conclusion allude to issues of relevance to the analysis and reporting of the broader elemental profiles of drinking water from all sources.

Water provides some of the more perplexing diet-related ironies in our various cultures. Bottled water is promoted as a healthier alternative to tap water. However, this is often not the case, and countries with the safest tap water are also the ones with the highest consumption of bottled water. Claims for bottled water include lower contents of pollutants, yet direct sources of pollution of our freshwater are the plastic factories making the bottles for the bottled water, and some indirect sources of water pollution relate to transportation of bottled water around the globe. Currently, one of the most important development goals in Africa and Asia is to deliver drinking water by pipes to homes and minimize the need to carry and store water. Yet it is now the affluent in developed countries carrying and storing water for drinking. Bottled water is estimated to be worth more than US\$ 22 billion; imagine having that amount of money to clean up and monitor local water supplies around the world. An interesting report on bottled water²

¹<http://www.wateryear2003.org/>.

²Ferrier, C. (2001). Bottled water: understanding a social phenomenon. http://www.panda.org/livingwaters/pubs/bottled_water.pdf

poses the question, “Is bottled water a threat to tap water?” The conclusion is—yes, in many ways it is: “Bottled waters should not be considered a sustainable alternative to tap water; they are not exempt of periodical contamination and are less energy-efficient than tap water. Tap water is and should remain a public service meant to deliver good quality drinking water.”

While some people find charming, the irony of drinking Californian bottled water in Italy and Italian bottled water in California more and more people are finding it disturbing. Greater value needs to be given to local supplies of drinking water, and more attention is required in the form of acquisition and publication of high quality analytical data for nutrient elements and contaminants.

About 10 years ago I was dining with a group of nutritionists, including a particularly eminent one. He rejected the bottled water and ordered a carafe of tap water, expressing concern that bottled water consumption was a threat to clean and safe water supplies. These days, as I look around Mediterranean beaches littered with empty plastic water bottles, I remember that conversation. It seemed a little eccentric to me at the time. It seems prophetic now.

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