

Using European Data - An Interview with Dr. Lenore Arab-Kohlmeier

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Background: Dr. Arab-Kohlmeier was originally expected to attend the conference and participate in the "Using International Data" discussion. When an unexpected schedule conflict arose, she was interviewed over the telephone by Dr. Klensin, the session moderator. That interview was recorded and played at the conference. Because Dr. Arab-Kohlmeier's comments contain an important perspective and information, the interview was transcribed as appears below. The text was only very lightly edited after transcription to preserve the flavor of a very informal and unprepared telephone conversation. Consequently, the remarks have not been as intensively reviewed by either participant as ones in a formal paper would have been.

JcK: What we are trying to do is increase some general understanding of the use of international data, that is data that originated in one country for local use and then is to be used in some other country. To some degree the intra-European data issues reflect most of the problems although you benefit from some commonalities of food habits. In addition, beginning recently, you have had the advantages of pressures originating outside strictly scientific community to consolidate and compare those data; i.e., with the EC situation. The nature and limitations of the NDB audience is such that discussions and examples that relate to import of data into the U.S.A. will be most understood and meaningfully related to, with issues of use of U.S. data outside the U.S. being next most comprehensible. To some extent this is an examination of what resources are available and where one

should look for information. So, I am particularly interested in finding out how to locate and, when necessary, assess the usefulness of, available data in terms of your directory and its updates, the INFOODS directory and critical national or regional databases that don't appear in those directories. You mentioned to me in Crete, for example, that for any sort of official uses in Germany, the Souci-Fachmann-Kraut book is basically not used, and that the BLS data base is used instead. To what extent is it generally true through Europe, that there are things that people think are the tables and things which people use that are different?

L A-K: O.K., I'll try to address that. But, first, John, you say hello to all of the people that I would have missed seeing at the meeting and tell them that for any more details, of course, I am accessible as is Clive West and other individuals who are involved with the Eurofoods operation in Europe--in Wageningen and in Berlin.

The BLS (Bundeslebensmittelschlüssel) is a nutrient data base with values on 12,000 foods and recipes that people can get from us on tape. It is a combination of many different food composition tables and a tremendous amount of guesstimate. The user has a database with no missing values and all of our users are coming up with comparable results at least as far as the nutrient values are concerned in the epidemiological studies conducted in Germany and Austria. This experiment began five years ago, in the meantime, the Ministry of Research and Technology and the Ministry of Health in Germany support only studies that use this common database in an allowed version. The users sign a contract saying they will not change the values in the data base. This is for the very simple purpose of

comparability. The BLS is used in German-speaking countries. There are 200 groups using it now, and it is based largely on Souci-Fachmann-Kraut but also on other tables.

That tells you about the German-speaking area. We're talking about 100 million people in Central Europe. Now, in other countries in Europe, there are national and local systems being used for different purposes. Probably in Holland and in Denmark, the systems are most centralized. There had been attempts to have a national nutrient database that is distributed widely and which is getting feedback from the users in terms of what they need and what they are missing. These are generally not data systems which are estimating missing values. And, although we have come a long way in the last ten years in knowing what different users in different countries need, the availability of data bases to users from other countries is not yet a reality. I cannot tell you how many databases are actually up and being used.

We have more or less an overview of the printed books, and those printed books are not that which is commonly being used. It's rather the other way around: people look for the software first, the software is the leading edge in data access. Users tend, if they can find software in their own language, to look for inexpensive software that is easily usable, widely available and accessible on PC's. If they find that in another language, they'll borrow and then translate it, rather than try to set up a system new. They take less into consideration the concept that "maybe those nutrients don't apply to my food". Now, in Europe, and especially as we're racing towards 1992, that becomes much less of an issue because we are sharing food, and we will be sharing food more and more.

JcK: A consolidated table like that with a lot of missing values in it is presumably subject to all of the advantages of a consolidated table (whichever one is using) and all the disadvantages of something which mixes analytic data from a number of sources and non-analytic data from a number of sources. Has that been a problem, or is the consistency for your application really more important than that set of issues?

L A-K: Really, consistency is more important. We're talking about the use in the epidemiological context where our first area of concern is the measurement error associated with portion sizes. We are investing much more in trying to reduce that than in trying to have more harmonious tables. So, to the earlier question, I guess the basic question is, "are food tables

becoming generic?" and I would think the answer is "yes": it is not a situation in which more and more resources are being poured into getting more analytical data. It's rather the other way around. We are heading more and more towards having a European database, and as a matter of fact, there are some different groups within the European Community--in EUROSTAT, in DG12, in the FLAIR group, and in the Medical Research Division--that are becoming increasingly interested in having some common European food nutrient tables for cross-country analyses. I don't know if these attempts will be successful, but we should know within the next two to three years.

JcK: How does one go about getting these kinds of tables and tapes which are essentially undocumented in terms of the published references?

L A-K: That's a good question.

L A-K: Our initial attempt to try to answer that question was in putting together that book called *European Food Composition Tables in Translation*. For each country we identified in 1987 the table or the various tables that were being published nationally, and who was producing them, and how many versions they had produced. In addition, we tried to get, or create, translations of the introductory materials into English, so that foreign users could also, in a reasonable way, begin using this "foreign" data, which may or may not have been "foreign" once you started looking at what was actually coming up between the lines. And certainly, that resource is still appropriate because the people producing tables have not changed, but it is outdated in that there are new tables that have come up since then. And, it seems the data--food nutrient composition tables in book form--are being produced more and more rapidly. At least in the Scandinavian countries, they are coming out every year, or every few years, with new national tables. So, it's hard to get an overview of what is there unless you are directly corresponding with the institutes or the working groups responsible for producing them.

JcK: But that publication, like the INFOODS directory for other areas, was much, much more successful, I think, in identifying printed materials than it was identifying the data bases. As we are seeing a shift toward data bases and software instead of the printed tables for most serious uses, that becomes more and more of a problem.

L A-K: There is no way to overview these currently. There is, as far as I know, no way to get at the successful software databases. They are being produced partly by some industries. UNILEVER, for example, has one or various that they are using and Milupa has some as well, but there is no European analogy to your Nutrient Databank Conference where people are coming together saying, "here's what we have and here's what we are using." What we're attempting to do in Berlin in the context of our WHO Collaborating Center on Nutritional Epidemiology is to install electronic mailing lists where people can ask those kinds of questions and those people doing nutritional epidemiology in Europe can address them. Of course, we have no constraints on Americans joining these mailing lists. I know you are on our mailing list (NUTEPI, see at end for instructions), so you could transfer this information further: how to get on this group, and what the node and access name is.

JcK: If one is trying to combine tables or pull data from some tables into other tables, what do you see as the special and hard problems these days? For example, in building a European table and pulling French data into a German table, or any of those data into a U.S. table?

L A-K: There are such a range of problems, and they haven't changed very much in the last decade. The first problem is really one of translation and definition of foods. I have personally given up on the idea that we are going to identify identical foods--the best we can do is identify similar foods--between the tables. In most cases, one will never have complete documentation on where those foods actually came from, or where the analytical data came from. Though it might be subconsciously troubling to many people, we have seemed to learn to live with it. If there is a problem, it is an illness in all the food compositions tables. There was an attempt in 1983 and 1984 to see if merging tables was technically possible. That was very successful, but was then laid aside with the final report on that project to the European community. Currently, in IARC (the International Agency on Research in Cancer), this task is being re-begun with more recent food nutrient composition tables from seven different countries, in the context of a large cohort study on diet and cancer. A cohort of 400,000 people in seven European countries is now being put together, and the need for a common database is very evident and has a top priority. We will be meeting and looking at this nutrient database which the group of Elio Riboli in Lyon is producing the week after next, actually concurrent with your nutrient database meeting.

JcK: How much U.S. data is being borrowed for use in Europe. Do you have any sense?

L A-K: There was a project that attempted to look at that very specifically, and I believe that the rough estimates were between 40 and 60 percent of the total mass of data that was available in Europe was actually borrowed from USDA. Now, if that had been stable at that point, or if it is decreasing, I really couldn't tell you, but there is a tremendous amount of American data in the European system, I know that the Greeks, for example, are relying very heavily on the USDA data, and within our own Souci-Fachmann-Kraut tables, there are 20 to 40 percent borrowing from the basic nutrient data, from various versions of USDA. This does not always mean that is the most recent USDA data either. It is from different versions of different handbooks. What one needs, or what one would like is a Michelin guide for composition tables, and we don't have anyone putting that together right now.

JcK: What one should both have the Green guide which tells you how to navigate and the Red guide which tells you something about the quality of it.

L A-K: Exactly.

JcK: Do we have any sense as to how much European data is trickling into databases in the U.S.?

L A-K: I would not have any idea.

JcK: I would assume some of McCance and very little of anything else, but you don't have any sense either?

L A-K: I wouldn't have any overview of that from this end of the Atlantic.

JcK: O.K. well sometimes you have insights, so I thought it was worth asking. I think that about takes care of the questions. Thank you, and on behalf of the Conference, our thanks and regards, and wishes that you could be joining us.

L A-K: Well, thank you as well, and I wish the Conference success. I have enjoyed them very much when I've been there, and since I was at the last one in San Francisco, I particularly regret not being able to be there this time. We will, in Berlin in October of next year, have a meeting of our Collaborating Center on Nutritional Epidemiology addressing the issues of validation and quality control which might be an

occasion for participants of the meeting to cross the other way and ask the questions directly, and we are inviting you all with open arms to see the new Berlin at that point in time. This will be October 1992.

JcK: I was about to ask how people get information on that conference, but it sounds like we can announce it at next year's Nutrient Databank Conference.

L A-K: Or, they can write to me to be put on our WHO Collaborating Center Newsletter where all the information on European meetings is contained.

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Information for subscription to "NUTEPI" electronic mailing list:

Send mail to LISTSERV@db0tui11 (from BITNET) or LISTSERV@tubvm.cs.tu-berlin.de (from Internet, UUCP, etc). The first, and only, line of the message should read:

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Where "Your Name" is your actual first and last name.

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