Functional food availability, a limitation to peoples’ health on Islands

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Abstract:

Background: All foods are imported to markets in smaller islands in the Caribbean. Before export of foods to these destinations, the foods are subjected to several preservative procedures like irradiation, pesticide spray and prolonged refrigeration etc., to last the extended transport periods. This reduces availability of protective elements and the nutrient contents of the foods to scanty levels, especially to common people with low and middle incomes. Hence the majority of people in these categories on the small islands become vulnerable to ill health.

Aims and Objectives: To assess 1. Food availability 2. Normal transport period for foods to reach from the suppliers, and 3. Current level of prevalence of non-infective chronic diseases in the area.

Methods: Data were collected from two sources. One set of data was collected from the three supermarkets on the island to obtain information on source, transport time and nature of foods imported; and the second from 200 randomly selected responses of diseased persons for information on the age, gender and cause of death.

Results: All the foods were imported and the time taken for the food (including protective foods) to reach the island was about 3 weeks. The major causes of death were malignancy (30%), diabetes and its complications (25%), cardio vascular diseases (19.5%), STD / HIV (8.5%) and other causes (17.0%). A review of prevalence of chronic diseases like hypertension, diabetes, heart diseases, arthritis and associated functional limitations, in the region reveals that their prevalence is proportionately high on the island compared to nearby developed mainland
regions. Body mass index of $\geq 25$ was reported to be as high as 58.3%. The health care facilities available are seen to be limited and public health activity to prevent or manage the prevailing chronic health issues, appeared to be meager.

**Conclusion:** There is a need to address the problem through public health actions to lower the incidence of the chronic degenerative diseases in the area: 1. Educate the community about the ways to improve their nutrition and life styles, 2. Make available health and nutrition promoting foods to all the people living in the islands, 3. Strengthen health services to tackle chronic degenerative diseases in the region.

**Key Words:** Foods, Nutrition, Chronic diseases, Mortality, Protective foods, Functional foods