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Professor Georges Casimir
Académie Royale de Médecine de Belgique
Palais des Académies
Rue Ducale, 1
B - 1000 Bruxelles – Belgique

Dear Professor Casimir,

We are writing to you regarding your report *Régimes végétariens et végétaliens administrés aux enfants et adolescents*, and the press release that was published on 14th May 2019.

We are very worried about the conclusions of your report and how they have been reported in the media. We understand your concerns about the health of vegan children. We agree with you that it is important to support vegan parents and not judge them. However we have seen these days headlines calling for vegan parents to be arrested or prosecuted.^{1,2} Criminalising vegan parents may lead to them not telling their doctors that they are vegan, missing the opportunity to receive adequate nutritional advice. In extreme cases, if parents feel judged and harassed, they might stop attending medical appointments, which could have adverse consequences on their child's health. In most of the published case reports on adverse effects of vegan diets in children, the common denominator and the main cause of the health problems was the lack of medical care the child was receiving and not the vegan diet itself.

The position of the most important dietetic associations is that a well-planned vegan diet is perfectly adequate for individuals of all ages, including infants, children and adolescents and during pregnancy and breastfeeding, and may provide health benefits for the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases.³⁻⁵ We have been counselling vegan parents for many years and we can say confidently that vegan children are healthy and thriving, and that educating vegan parents on how to plan well-balanced diets for their children is feasible and easy.

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You say in your report that vegan diets systematically lead to nutritional imbalance and deficits, particularly in essential amino acids, vitamin B12, vitamin D, calcium, iron, zinc, iodine and DHA. However you do not provide any reference showing that vegan diets in children lead to nutritional deficiencies more often than non-vegan diets and we have not found studies supporting your statement. It is very likely that the diets of some vegan children are suboptimal. But the same could be said of non-vegan children. According to some observational studies in Europe, vitamin D, calcium, iron, zinc, and iodine are the most commonly seen deficiencies in non-vegan children. Non-vegan diets in childhood are usually deficient in other important micro and macronutrients as well, like folate, vitamin E and fibre.⁶⁻⁸

All the nutrients you mention, except vitamin B12 and vitamin D, can be obtained from plant foods. Vitamin D can be obtained from sunlight, natural foods, fortified foods or supplements.⁹ In the absence of adequate sun exposure most children and adults will need supplements regardless of their diet; in one of the studies referenced above, less than 3% of European 2-8 years children had adequate intakes of vitamin D.⁶ Vitamin B12 is synthesized by microorganisms and can be found in fortified foods and as supplements.¹⁰ Oral supplements are cheap, easy to obtain and can be taken just once a week. Children and adults who take B12 supplements regularly have normal blood levels and do not show signs of deficiency.^{11,12}

You also say that planning is essential for a vegan diet to be well-balanced, and we agree. However this is not specific of vegan diets: all dietary patterns, especially during childhood, should be planned carefully. Official dietary guidelines are designed to help citizens (vegans and non-vegans) to get all the essential nutrients they need and to reduce the risk of chronic health problems.^{13,14} A well planned vegan diet has been shown to provide at least 90% of the Dietary Reference Intakes of protein, iron, zinc, calcium, and n-3 fatty acids for children from 1 to 18 years.¹⁵

The report states that vegan children require systematic supplementation and mandatory clinical assessments and blood tests, which makes vegan diets more a “medical treatment” than a lifestyle, and thus unethical for children. All children must have regular reviews with their general doctors and/or paediatricians to monitor their growth, health and development; this is not just for vegan children. There is no evidence showing that vegan children that are growing and developing well and eating a well-balanced vegan diet supplemented with vitamin B12 need more medical investigations than other children. Taking a daily or weekly oral supplement of vitamin B12 cannot be seen as a form of medical treatment. Many non-vegan children take supplements regularly and many countries recommend babies and children are given supplements containing one or more vitamins.¹⁶

In summary, none of the arguments you provide to discourage vegan diets in children is supported by scientific evidence and clinical experience. Vegan parents need up-to-date nutritional advice and support from their health care providers, as any other parents. We believe that the best way to ensure vegan children are healthy is educating parents and health professionals in planning well-balanced diets. We would be very grateful if you considered our arguments and modified the Académie de Médecine’s position statement on vegan diets.



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