

The power of the fork can help save the planet

The nutritional, environmental and ethical consequences of consuming animal products

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Like most of us, I was introduced to Carnism by my parents and unfortunately never really questioned the choice to consume animal products until many years later. As a result, I was Comfortably Unaware (Oppenlander) of the nutritional, environmental, and ethical consequences associated with the choice to consume animal products.

It isn't very often that I see medical and/or nutritional research which connects what I consider to be the three food choice criteria which are nutrition, the environment, and ethics (animal rights).

Ethically problematic

As a result, I was pleasantly surprised to read an editorial published within the February 1, 2023 edition (volume 188) of The American Journal of Cardiology titled Are We What We Eat? The Moral Imperative of the Medical Profession to Promote Plant-Based Nutrition (Hull, Charles and Kaplan).

The editorial opened with "The typical Western diet, high in processed and animal-based foods, is nutritionally and ethically problematic.

Beyond the well-documented cruelty to animals that characterizes the practices of the factory-farming industry, current patterns of meat consumption contribute to medical and moral harm in humans on both an individual level and a public health scale.

We aim to deconstruct, by highlighting their fallacies, the common positive and normative arguments that are used to defend current nutritional patterns.

Animal-based foods promote the mechanisms that underlie chronic cardiometabolic disease, whereas whole-food plant-based nutrition can reverse them. Factory farming of animals also contributes to climate change, antibiotic resistance, and the spread of infectious diseases. Finally, the current allocation of nutritional resources in the United States is unjust.

A societal shift toward more whole-food plant-based patterns of eating stands to provide significant health benefits and ethical advantages, and the medical profession has a duty to advocate accordingly.

Although it remains important for individuals to make better food choices to promote their own health, personal responsibility is predicated on sound advice and on resource equity, including the availability of healthy options.

Nutrition equity is a moral imperative and should be a top priority in the promotion of public health." The nutritional consequences associated with the choice to consume animal products has been very well established for many decades."

Minimizing animal products

Independent peer-reviewed literature has connected the choice to consume animal products with various forms of cancer, arthritis, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, high blood pressure and other common ailments.

The solution often suggested within this literature is to minimize or eliminate the consumption of animal products while at the same time increasing the consumption of plants in their rawest forms.

The solution too often recommended by the medical profession is a prescription drug which lacks root cause analysis, rather than the suggestion of a lifestyle change related to food choices.

Hippocrates, knowing of the healing properties of foods, who is often referred to as the father of medicine, stated "Let food be thy



Whole-foods and plant-based patterns of eating may provide significant health benefits.

medicine, let medicine be thy food."

It would seem that Hippocrates would agree that the medical profession has a moral obligation to promote plant-based nutrition.

What is 'healthy'?

An October 11, 2022 . Times Union article titled Commentary: Physicians need better training in nutrition (Barnett, Friedman and Graff) stated "Nearly 80 percent of Americans are confused about which foods are 'healthy.'

Who can blame them, when Time magazine proclaims 'Eat Butter' on its cover? (Tip: Butter is not healthy.) And when people are eventually diagnosed with obesity or heart disease, their physicians are often unprepared to discuss which foods are actually good for them.

It's not the doctors' fault, since medical schools often don't teach our physicians enough about nutrition...With life expectancy in the U.S. dropping for the second year in a row due to conditions including COVID-19 and heart disease, both of which are impacted by diet, continuing medical education in nutrition for physicians is direly needed."

A February 13, 2023 Boston Globe article titled Could a more plant-based diet help you avoid taking certain medications? (Gagosz) stated "Our research supports that changing to plant-based nutrition can improve your weight, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, inflammation, sexual

function, energy, bowel function, and autoimmune disorders.

We have found that those who participate in the program lose an average of 4 pounds in one month.

Those with a BMI of 30 or more lose an average of 5 pounds over the month. That's healthy — you don't want people to lose 15 pounds at once and then binge eat and gain it all back. But we've also found that people's total cholesterol decreases by 25 mg/dL on average over the month.

In the past, nutrition really hasn't been discussed in great detail in medical schools. A lot of patients who come to me say they were given the option to go on medication or the doctor might say they should look into changing their 'diet' but don't give them any tips on how they could start that process.

Patients are also often told that something could be 'genetic,' which sometimes translates

to something they have to accept when that isn't true."

Lifestyle Medicine is growing

The following was provided to me by Dr. Melissa Sundermann, DO, DipABLM, a physician who is double board-certified in Internal Medicine and Lifestyle Medicine with over 20 years of clinical experience:

"I attended medical school and residency during the late 90s and between those 7 years of medical education, I received approximately 17 hours of nutritional education. Most of this curriculum was focused on biochemical principles and rare diseases that could result from nutritional deficiencies.

Once I entered clinical practice, I felt ill-prepared to actually counsel my patients with regards to a healthful dietary pattern. I have always considered myself quite healthy and I believed I was 'eating clean' according to what I had learned mainly through media outlets. Fast forward to 2018 when I decided to pursue a pathway towards board certification in Lifestyle Medicine.

This journey required taking a deep dive into evidence-based nutrition...and I was shocked! So much of what I believed to be true was not supported by science. I learned about the power of plants (fruits, vegetables, beans, wholegrains, nuts/seeds) and their power to not only prevent chronic disease, but also to possibly reverse diseases such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension, hyperlipidemia and obesity.

I also learned that 80-90% of chronic diseases are primarily lifestyle related. Yes, genetics do play a role, but to a much lesser extent than lifestyle behaviors. Researchers at the Mayo Clinic looked at data from a representative sample of 4,745 people who participated in the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES)

They found that less than 3 percent of Americans live a 'Healthy Lifestyle' as defined by four qualifications: 1) Moderate or vigorous exercise for at least 150 minutes/week, 2) A diet score in the top 40 percent on the Healthy Eating Index, 3) A body fat percentage under 20 percent (for men) or 30 percent (for women), 4) Not smoking.

These findings suggest we have a lot to do to improve the overall health and well-being for



Food is medicine.

our patients. Thankfully the American College of Lifestyle Medicine has made great strides to educate clinicians across the globe to help shift the paradigm of medicine from a 'sick-care' model to a 'well-care' system.

Lifestyle Medicine is a medical specialty that uses therapeutic lifestyle interventions as primary modality to treat chronic conditions including, but not limited to, cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes and obesity. Lifestyle medicine certified clinicians are trained to apply evidence-based, whole-person, prescriptive lifestyle change to treat and, when used intensively, often reverse such conditions.

Applying the six pillars of lifestyle medicine—a whole-food plant-predominant dietary pattern, physical activity, restorative sleep, stress management, avoidance of risky substances and positive social connections can help to optimize health and well-being and hopefully not only treat many chronic diseases, but also prevent these disease states from happening in the first place.

I am very grateful to be a part of the growing community of Lifestyle Medicine. We are a passionate and energetic group of clinicians and researchers with the shared goal of not only advancing our patient's lifespans, but more importantly their 'wellspans'.

What is longevity without vitality after all? Martin Luther King, Jr summarized this point beautifully with his quote, 'The quality, not the longevity, of one's life is what is important.'"

The ethics of eating

I was fortunate as a university accounting faculty member to be involved with a working group which was formed to make recommendations to the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board pertaining to their initial Meat, Dairy and Poultry sustainability reporting standards, as a result I saw literature from around the world with respect to those industries.

I also taught a capstone business ethics course which required students to independently research and discuss the environmental consequences of animal agriculture. The research results consistently established that animal agriculture used excessive amounts of water, land, antibiotics and feed/food inputs. Those industries also excessively polluted water, were a leading contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, land degradation, deforestation and promoted losses of biodiversity.

Given the "well-documented cruelty to animals" that is associated with the choice to consume animal products, I will not mention the various forms of extreme cruelty imposed upon these intelligent, sentient and emotional beings from the time they are born until their lives end at the slaughterhouse.

'Isms' such as racism, sexism, ableism, classism and many others are condoned, yet on a daily basis speciesism is accepted and promoted by the majority of us via the willingness to consume animal products.

An article titled Why the Meat Paradox Causes Cognitive Dissonance (Mackenzie) and the book Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows (Joy) explain the disconnect associated with the choice to consume animal beings.

Life is life, farm animals are no different than our pets, some farm animals are more intelligent than our pets, and like our pets they have individuality. When you eat meat, the choice you make isn't what type of meat you are going to eat, rather it is who you are choosing to eat. What you choose to put on your fork has lots of power.

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