

MEMO FROM MFJ

Healthier Canadians—How?



I was arguing with a friend recently about how best to improve the public's health.

I maintained—surprise, surprise—that what we need are high-leverage actions by the government: decisive gestures like banning partially hydrogenated oil (the source of artificial trans fat), capping sodium in processed foods and restaurant meals, mandating calorie and sodium labelling on menus of chain restaurants, and banning junk-food ads aimed at young children.

My friend advocated an indirect approach: encouraging people to buy locally grown foods, shop at farmers markets, cook more meals from scratch, plant a garden, buy organic produce, and understand the environmental consequences of industrial-scale farming.

While I'm convinced that my approach would lead to healthier diets for more people, it's a course of action that must contend with powerful industry lobbies and timid government officials. It takes years to change laws and regulations, and progress is often lost when a government switches parties.

This special issue of *Nutrition Action* presents interviews with food and nutrition experts who are trying to improve diets and the "food system" from very different directions.

First, Harvard professor Walter Willett provides the scientific background on what constitutes a "healthful diet." On page 5 we translate that advice into a colourful day's worth of food, and on page 13 we suggest becoming friends with 10 delicious foods—from red lentils to edamame—that may not be kitchen staples at your home.



The bottom line: healthy diets and food grown and produced in a way that protects the Earth.

On page 6 hypertension expert Norman Campbell of the University of Calgary tells us why Canadians need to keep their blood pressure down. (He and I agree that we need "much stronger policies and regulatory approaches" to cut sodium, for example.)

On page 10 food-marketing maven Marion Nestle explains how it's tough to eat a healthy diet when food manufacturers are doing everything they can to shift as many dollars as possible from your pocket to theirs.

On page 8 my friend's argument gets a boost from prominent American restaurateur Alice Waters (Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California), who says that by choosing fresh, locally grown, organic food from farmers markets, we'll end up with a diet that's better for our health, taste buds, community, and planet.

Finally, Britain's Prince Charles weighs in (page 9), emphasizing how industrial farming's use of irrigation, fertilizers, and pesticides requires massive and unsustainable inputs of energy and generates massive outputs of environmental pollution and degradation. He worries that if we don't change

the way food is produced, our planet simply won't be able to provide sufficient food over the coming decades and centuries.

So, who's right? I suspect that my friend and I both are. Individuals *and* governments need to do everything they can to help us produce, distribute, buy, and eat our food in a way that makes humans—and the fragile planet we inhabit—healthier.

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The contents of NAH are not intended to provide medical advice, which should be obtained from a qualified health professional.

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Nutrition Action Healthletter (ISSN 0885-7792) is published 10 times a year (monthly except bi-monthly in Jan./Feb. and Jul./Aug.).

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