

Stop the beef eaters, save the world

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The early results from the Canadian Health Measures Survey has revealed that the majority of adult Canadians are overweight or obese and at risk of developing chronic health sequelae at some point in their lives.¹ This news is probably no surprise to those following the epidemiological trends of the past decades, but the sheer scale of the problem is a call to action. Some experts have faulted the government, saying that the problem lies with the failure of policymakers to encourage Canadians to exercise more. Others take a more Pogo-esque approach and shift the blame to the public, challenging them to buy nutritious ingredients and learn how to cook.

I doubt that any one strategy will solve the immediate weight crisis. And with all due respect to the experts, I would like to make a suggestion that I expect will come across as loony, naive, inspired or some combination thereof. Given physicians' duly appointed role as environmental stewards, it behooves us to approach the obesity problem not only from a health perspective, but from an ecological perspective as well. How best to do that? I say we focus less on the vegging out and more on vegetarianism, thus killing two (strictly metaphorical) birds with one stone. Unlike exercise, which can be conveniently procrastinated upon, people have to eat *something*, so why not tell our patients to eat with both health and the environment in mind?

The environmental damage caused by livestock may not get quite as much media attention as the pollution caused by power generation, transportation and politicians worldwide, but there is little doubt of its effect on the health of our ecosystem. In *Livestock's Long Shadow*, the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organisation estimated that 18 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions is attributable to the total lifecycle of livestock production.² While skeptics may debate the exact numbers involved (and some may argue that the 18 per cent



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figure is too low), the fact remains that Bessie and her barnyard friends are a major contributor to greenhouse emissions, not to mention water depletion, land degradation, soil erosion and diminishing biodiversity.² Given that global production of meat is expected to more than double by 2050,² one can only imagine the sort of environmental impact livestock will have if growth is allowed to remain unchecked.

Other countries are far ahead of us with regard to the promotion of eco-nutrition. In Sweden, for example, new governmental recommendations about food choices are based on environmental considerations as well as health impacts. Soon, Swedes will be advised on the benefits of locally raised food, sustainable fish and meat sources (in small quantities), and, perhaps most radical of all, on the use of clean and abundant tap water instead of the bottled variety.³ You'll find none of this in the trusty *Canada's Food Guide*.

What about the more proximal health effects of vegetarianism? A recent review of 14 prospective trials confirmed that those who restrict themselves to plant-based foods have significantly better lipid profiles and lower risk of ischemic heart disease than those who partake of animal products.⁴ In the realm of digestive health, meat intake has been identified as one of the sole dietary risk factors for

colon cancer,⁵ and vegetarian diets generally include a good deal of fibre, which one assumes can only help push patients into the comfortable middle range of the much-beloved Bristol Stool Scale. Of course, it is vital to ensure that patients are consuming sufficient protein, calcium and micronutrients, hence the need for a well-balanced vegetarian diet and supplementation where necessary.

Naturally, many patients may grimace at the thought of giving up their beloved burgers and bacon, even with the added incentive of environmental guilt racking their consciences. And indeed, vegetarianism may not be for everyone. However, coming from a source such as a physician one knows and trusts, rather than the imagined stereotype of a hemp-clad hermit doused in patchouli, the call of the herbivore may not seem quite as far out.

We certainly can't change everyone, but we might just get people to think about their food choices and the power they have to contribute to a better environment for all of us. After all, that's the Canadian way, isn't it?

Edward S. Weiss HBSc
Class of 2012

Schulich School of Medicine and
Dentistry
University of Western Ontario
London, Ont.

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