



Interview with the Experts

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Public Health & Social Justice Activist & Educator

Q: *As a medical doctor and professor, what do you wish to impart to your patients and students about our current Western food system?*

A: It is important for both health care professionals and their patients to understand how food is produced in order to make healthy food choices and advocate for a safe and just food system. Our current Western food system is not well-suited to human health. Over the past few hundred years, human diets have changed dramatically. Society has moved away from the hunter-gatherer's diverse diet of myriad plants and animals toward a reliance on fewer and fewer crops, resulting in vulnerability to disastrous crop losses and their accompanying famines. Traditional small family farms have been replaced by large, profit-driven, agribusiness corporations, which promote unhealthy and even dangerous practices. These include:

- Overuse of endocrine-disrupting, carcinogenic pesticides, which particularly harm migrant and seasonal farm workers and their families.
- Genetic modification of crops (mostly utilizing pesticide-resistant genes), which leads to the development of super-weeds resistant to traditional pest control measures and multiple pesticides (as inevitably resistance to each new pesticide used develops); GM crops contaminate native crops (resulting in financial disasters for smaller farmers, as export markets collapse), alter soil quality, and adversely affect animal and human health.
- Biopharming, the genetic modification of crops to produce pharmaceuticals and industrial chemicals, creates even more dangerous risks to animal and human health.
- Conversion of acreage from food crop development to biofuel production, leading to increased international food prices and exacerbation of famine in the developing world.
- Overuse of non-therapeutic agricultural antibiotics, the dominant source of food-borne, antibiotic-resistant infections in humans, a multibillion-dollar problem which is inadequately

You might be surprised by what even a small home garden can produce. Plus, the benefits of being outside—sunshine, fresh air, and even exposure to the diverse bacteria in the soil—nourish us on many levels. My husband's favorite work is the work he does in the garden. xxx

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Dr Donohoe received his BS and MD from UCLA, completed his internship and residency at Brigham and Women's Hospital / Harvard Medical School, and was a Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholar at Stanford University. His career has included clinical practice in academic medical centers, community hospitals, and clinics for homeless and un/underinsured patients.

Martin has taught courses in public health, medical humanities, social justice ethics, women's health, and the history of medicine. He has published articles and frequently lectures locally, nationally, and internationally on public health and social justice, activism, and the medical humanities. His articles, syllabi, and open-access slideshows are available at <http://www.phsj.org>.

- monitored by understaffed and underfunded government agencies tasked with keeping the food supply safe.
- Greatly increased use of food additives like high fructose corn syrup, which—together with the easy availability of cheap, high calorie fast food, inadequate exercise, and government subsidies and nutritional policies promoting meat and dairy at the expense of fruit and vegetables—contributes to a massive epidemic of obesity, which causes 300,000 deaths per year, is responsible for 35% of U.S. health care costs, and which has resulted in increasing rates of hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and many cancers.
- Other threats to our food supply include:
 - » Overpopulation, decreasing availability of irrigation water, soil erosion (which exceeds new soil formation), and war (with the selective destruction of food crops), all of which lead to malnutrition, famine, and worsening cycles of violence.
 - » Overfishing, causing the collapse of many vital fisheries, and the creation of fish farms, with their attendant high concentrations of estuary-damaging waste.
 - » Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (“Mad Cow Disease”) consequent to raising cattle on rendered animal remains, leading to a few outbreaks of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in meat-eaters.
 - » Irradiation of food, which carries uncertain health risks, and for which the production of radioactive cobalt and cesium requires commercial reprocessing of high-level nuclear waste.
 - » Global warming secondary to fossil fuel used for food production and distribution, since the average meal travels 1,500 miles to reach your dinner table.

Patients should be advised to eat hormone- and pesticide-free, organic, locally-produced food whenever possible; eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, and grains; remove the skin and fat from meats; avoid fried and fatty foods; eschew fast food; moderate alcohol intake; limit intake of top predator fish, which often contain high levels of neurotoxic mercury; eat slowly; avoid

candies, sodas, and other simple carbohydrates; use filtered tap, not bottled, water, as it is safer for most people and for the environment, as well as much less expensive; and get plenty of aerobic exercise. Pregnant/nursing women need to be especially careful, as their nutritional choices impact their own health, as well as that of the developing fetus/infant.

Q: *As a social activist, why do you think it is important that community leaders (physicians, teachers, parents, board members, organizers) get involved in our food safety; how do you suggest that these people focus their efforts?*

- A:** Community leaders can do much to improve food safety and optimize nutrition, including:
- Improve public education regarding nutrition, eliminate corporate-sponsored curricular materials from the classroom, and adequately fund schools while eliminating soda “pouring rights” contracts with soft drink manufacturers.
 - Support school and community exercise programs.
 - Alter agricultural policies to subsidize healthy foods.
 - Improve government nutrition programs (*e.g.*, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the School Lunch Program) to increase the availability of healthy food choices.
 - Advocate for better food labeling (*e.g.*, calories and fat grams on restaurant menus, identifying genetically-modified food products).
 - Outlaw production of genetically-modified and biopharm crop production.
 - Minimize, and when possible eliminate, the use of pesticides, artificial hormones, and non-therapeutically-used agricultural antibiotics.
 - Adjust immigration policies and pass laws to fairly compensate migrant and seasonal farm workers, improve farm safety, limit toxic exposures, and provide comprehensive health care.
 - Increase funding and staffing of food safety agencies; increase penalties for violators, including fines and prison sentences.
 - Promote alternative energy, since fossil fuel use increases global warming (and thus famine) and leads to higher levels of toxic heavy metals in soil and water.

- Support campaign finance reform, to limit the excessive influence of corporate agribusiness and the fast food lobby over our elected representatives.
- Limit manipulative marketing by fast food chains to small children, who are vulnerable to exploitive advertising messages and unable to discern truth from fiction in the tens of thousands of ads they are exposed to each year.
- Tax non-nutritious foods, such as sodas and candy, using the proceeds to fund nutrition education and health care (this has been shown to decrease soda consumption).
- Advocate for a more open national science policy, based on sound science and designed to promote independent research and prevent corporations from citing “trade secrets” as the rationale for not making data available that is relevant to public health.
- Increase the role of federal agencies, promulgating science-based regulations designed to promote human and animal health and environmental preservation, while also protecting small family farms; public campaigns to counter fake news.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care.” In the United States, 15% of the population lives below the poverty level and are food insecure. Children and racial and ethnic minorities suffer higher percentages of poverty and food insecurity.

The United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization has stated that enough food is produced daily to provide every living person with over 2700 calories/day. Sadly, half the world’s food is wasted. Solving world hunger and improving the safety and long-term security of the world’s food supply does not require dangerous technologies; many scientists argue that it could be accomplished through local, sustainable, organic agricultural practices tested over millennia. Most agree that it requires primarily political and social will.

The above actions will require all concerned citizens (which should mean anyone with an alimentary tract) to work, individually and collectively, to create a healthier and safer food production and distribution system, to curb obesity, and to eliminate malnutrition and famine. The Food Safety/Food Justice page (<http://phsj.org/food-safety-issues/>) and the Obesity page (<http://phsj.org/obesity/>) of the Public Health and Social Justice website contain many open-access slide shows, articles, and links to organizations working to improve nutrition, food safety, and food justice worldwide.

Armed with knowledge and passion, citizens can begin to affect positive change. For those who despair that they are too weak to accomplish anything significant, remember the African proverb: “If you think you are too small to have an impact, try going to bed with a mosquito in your tent.”

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Some portions of this interview are adapted from: Donohoe, MT. *Public Health and Social Justice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2013: <https://phsj.org/public-health-and-social-justice-reader/>