

Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough Public Health

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Sustainable Diets for a Healthier You and a Healthier World

After the year-end holiday binge, we humans become remorseful and tend to over-react by severely restricting our caloric intake or subjecting ourselves to so-called “detoxifying” cleanses as a way to purify and recharge. None of these strategies work in the long run, nor do they take a big picture view of food consumption and our future as a planet or a species. If we want to eat healthy and eat smart, what we really need to do is embrace a plant-based diet that moderates our intake of animal proteins and by doing so, shift world food production and agricultural practices towards those that will help sustain our planet. We need “sustainable” diets.

The timing for change might be right: Health Canada has recently announced a Healthy Eating Strategy that promises to review our Canada Food Guide, among other things. Already noted is the need to base any new dietary guidelines on evidence and information beyond the basic level of nutrition and individual health. As well as basic nutritional science, Health Canada has promised to consider food security, the environment, and the health and wellbeing of more vulnerable groups like indigenous populations that have suffered from exposure to western diets.

Environmentally sustainable diets and guidelines are not new, but are certainly complex and need consideration to reduce environmental burdens within the food system. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations defines sustainable diets as “those diets with low environmental impacts that contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable, nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy, while optimizing natural and human resources.”

So far, Qatar and Brazil are leading the way and can offer Canada some ideas. Introduced in 2015, the middle-eastern state of Qatar’s new dietary guidelines includes a section entitled “Eat Healthy While Protecting the Environment”. These sustainability-based guidelines includes recommendations to eat a plant-based diet, reduce food waste, choose local and regionally produced foods, conserve water, and serve fresh homemade foods rather than processed or purchased ones.

Qatar’s dietary guidelines recognize that the production and consumption of food (including processing, packaging, transportation and waste disposal) impact the environment and also deplete water. They raise concerns about solid waste generation and the depletion of fish stocks as well. Their new dietary guidelines note that most water used by humans is incorporated into food (e.g., pesticide/fertilizer

production, animal uses, food processing) and that in general, plant-based foods (i.e., fruit, vegetables, legumes and grains) use less water in their production and have lower greenhouse gas emissions than animal-based foods. Supporting documents note that “overconsumption of food and eating highly processed and packaged low nutrient foods also increases water use, greenhouse gas emissions and the production of waste.”

Besides advising consumers in Qatar to limit sugar, salt and fat, the protection of the environment is highlighted. Included tips are just as relevant in Canadian society, as are Brazil’s advice to avoid “ultra-processed” foods such as packaged snacks, soft drinks and instant noodles. Besides being harmful to our health, Brazil warns that the means of production, distribution, marketing, and consumption of these ultra-processed foods “damage culture, social life, and the environment.”

Canada is a major producer of pulses, such as lentils and beans, which are sustainable and nutritious alternatives to meat. The FAO considers pulses to be “climate smart”. We are already seeing the impact of climate change in Peterborough, with severe weather on the rise, and a 2016 drought that stressed out local farmers and depleted water tables. Considering the importance of sustainable diets, food industry’s production of ultra-processed foods, and development of new Dietary Guidelines for Canada, 2017 may be the time to rethink whether all foods really do fit into healthy and sustainable eating pattern.

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For more information about Dr. Salvaterra, her bio is available on this webpage:

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