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The diet conundrum.

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“Well, you’ve got to die of something” my patient told me. I sighed inwardly and chalked up another failure to get my lifestyle message across. Unfortunately, conversations like this are a familiar experience to anyone involved in health promotion.

An area of particular concern is diet, which has a strong association with the development of cardiovascular disease. Government advice is clear; a healthy diet should be based on starchy carbohydrates, and contain smaller amounts of fat and protein (Public Health England, 2016a). Unsaturated oils and spreads are promoted over saturated fats, and the emphasis is on lean meat and fish, with limited amounts of red meat. People are advised to eat five portions of fruit or vegetables every day, and at least one portion of oily fish each week.

Despite the clarity of this advice, results from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey reveal that only 27% of adults aged 19 to 64 years are eating their five-a-day (Public Health England, 2016b). Consumption of red meat and saturated fat is above the recommended level, and few people are eating oily fish. There is no evidence that eating patterns have improved since previous surveys. One suggested reason for this is cost. Adherents of this view claim that healthy foods are more expensive than less healthy ones - but is this really the case?

A recently published report by the Institute of Economic Affairs challenges the belief that healthy food is expensive and points out that much of the research supporting this idea is based on cost per calorie, rather than cost per weight (Snowden, 2017). This introduces significant bias, by making low-calorie foods appear more expensive than high-calorie ones. A low-calorie yoghurt, for example, will appear to be more expensive than a full-fat version, even if the retail price is identical. The report goes on to demonstrate that there is little cost difference between the healthy and less-healthy versions of most foods, and comments that the core constituents of a healthy diet - starchy carbohydrates, fruits and vegetables – are relatively cheap. The report estimates that it costs as little as 30p to get your five-a-day, and that a healthy diet can be bought in the supermarket for less than £2 a day, much less than a diet based on processed foods or takeaways.

So why, as a nation, do we continue to eat so poorly? Snowden (2017) concludes that the principal reasons that we choose unhealthy food are taste and convenience, rather than price or health considerations. While there is clearly an element of truth in this, it seems a rather cynical view of human behaviour. Are we really so lazy that we don’t care about the cost to our health? As a nurse, I prefer a more generous view of human behaviour. As a child, I was brought up on a diet of cheap but nutritious local produce. There wasn’t much

money, but my mother made it go a long way by cooking everything from scratch; her ideas about nutrition have defined how I eat today. Other people are less lucky, and grow up in households where a knowledge of nutrition is in shorter supply, resulting in a greater reliance on less-healthy, convenience foods.

Recognising that individuals may have unrealistic beliefs about the cost of healthy food is important for any nurse involved in health promotion. We also need to recognise, however, that the reasons for unhealthy behaviours are complex, and require an understanding of the individual, and the factors that shape their thinking. Achieving this in the few minutes that we have with patients is one of our greatest challenges.

Public Health England (2016a) *The Eatwell Guide*, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide> accessed 13/03/2017.

Public Health England (2016b) National Diet and Nutrition Survey Results from Years 5 and 6 (combined) of the Rolling Programme (2012/2013 – 2013/2014), available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/ndns-results-from-years-5-and-6-combined> accessed 13/03/2017.

Snowdon, C. (2017) Cheap as chips: is a healthy diet affordable? Institute of Economic Affairs, available at <https://iea.org.uk/publications/cheap-as-chips-is-a-healthy-diet-affordable/> accessed 10/03/2017.