

# Medical students learn to cater for healthy appetites

Medical students at the University of Maryland, MD, USA, have been put in the kitchen with a professional chef to learn about healthy eating. The programme, *Whole Heartedly: Cooking Classes for Healthy Living*, is the first designed specifically for a medical school.

The aim of the classes is to integrate healthy eating practices with prevention and treatment of nutrition-related diseases. "We want to provide students with the knowledge and skills to incorporate nutrition principles into their future practice and into their own lives", says Stephen Havas (Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine, and the Department of Medicine, University of Maryland School of Medicine).

His co-director in the programme, Michael Miller (University of Maryland School of Medicine), says "the cooking classes provide a visual demonstration that will have a greater impact than reading a paper about how to prepare a healthy meal". Miller adds: "I believe that most medical schools have placed little if any emphasis on nutrition, simply because there are so many other topics in the curricula that have gained priority owing to the expertise and training of the professors. Moreover, nutrition expertise has most commonly fallen under the auspices of dietitians rather than physicians and as such, there has been very little impetus to provide the former group with direction over standards for medical education."

"Preventive medicine still is short-changed in curricular time throughout the US", notes Havas. "Instead, the emphasis is on disease management, even though the pay-off in terms of population health is much smaller. Part of the reason, he suggests, "lies in the discomfort of many physicians in dealing with behaviour change".

The need for the cooking and nutrition component of the medical curriculum was emphasised in a US survey of more than 2000 people with diabetes done by market research firm RoperASW in February. About half those questioned said that their health-care providers had never discussed ways to reduce risks for heart disease and stroke.

Another survey, reported last month in Canada, showed income and sex imbalances in nutrition. The

average mother who left school before age 18 years with an income of less than Can \$10 000 a year (US\$6000), was likely to eat more daily portions of fruit and vegetables than a married, middle-aged, male executive with a masters degree in business who earns more than Can \$60 000. "The gap between men and women absolutely sticks out", says Claudio Perez, who produced the fruit and vegetable consumption analysis for Statistics Canada.

Miller says that the medical students themselves are part of the research. The students were surveyed at the start of the programme: three-quarters met the recommendation that 30% or less of total calories in their diet came from fat, but only 48% met the recommendation that 10% or less of total calories should come from saturated fat. Only a quarter ate at least five daily servings of fruit and vegetables, only 22% had a diet that included at least 20 g of fibre, and a mere 18% exercised for the recommended 5 or more days each week.

"We do expect to see improvement in their diet and are developing tools to follow these students over the next year. In truth, any change that we see will be an improvement because the diet of the typical medical student is nothing to brag about. I imagine it is similar in the UK and Canada", commented Miller.

About 25 students took part in the first hands-on cooking class, with volunteers mixing spices and stirring ingredients while the chef, Suzanne Huber, demonstrated recipes, discussed cooking oils and types of fat, and offered samples of new products on the market. Huber, a certified nutrition counsellor, professional chef, and pastry chef was hired after she presented a cooking demonstration to the faculty members who developed the curriculum.

Abbe Penziner, a 32-year-old third-year medical student, was very enthusiastic about the class, which she described as "something innovative and long overdue in the medical curriculum. I find it ironic that the training to become health-care providers can be so inherently

unhealthy with long, gruelling study and work hours [making] it very difficult to find and maintain healthy living habits. Although we shouldn't be expected to become nutritionists, we

can be expected to have a solid awareness of everyday food choice pitfalls."

Another student, Thomas Dean, said that the course had already proved useful. "Previously, when counselling a patient about diet, I felt quite inept at even broaching the subject. My interventions were poor, consisting mainly of 'eat less fat, eat less cholesterol, veg-

gies are good'. Now, I feel more confident in how to approach a patient in need of a dietary intervention."

The classes are part of a national initiative, the Nutrition Academic Award Program, funded by 5-year grants from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. So far, 21 US medical schools are involved.

The experiment is creating interest in other countries. Graeme Catto of King's College, London, UK—and President of the UK General Medical Council—says he is interested in both the concept and the eventual outcome. "Nutrition is of enormous importance, but hard to get a real handle on how best to take the topic forward." The difficulty, he suggests, is that doctors and educators tend not to look at diet on its own but as a part of specific systemic problems. He suspects that this "is largely because the evidence base is poor for much of this area but the opinion/political base is strongly held", for example, by vegetarians or people concerned about genetically modified food. "Obtaining more real evidence for some of the apparently strongly held opinions would be helpful", he concludes.

The programme organisers have kept a low profile so far to allow initial problems to be resolved. However, Miller plans more publicity: "now that we have had a great response we will set the stage for making a bigger splash, by inviting some of our higher level educators for the cooking classes slated for later this spring".

Doug Payne



A new role for doctors?