

Lifestyle Changes for Your Health and the Health of the Planet



When asked what she does now, Dr. Mimi Guarneri, a cardiologist, responds “I create health.” She was the morning keynote speaker at our recent regional Symposium held in San Diego. In her presentation, she displayed with impactful slides, rich in research studies, and talked about the experiences that led her to change the way she approaches health — locally and globally.

Peppering her talk with her characteristic “right,” Dr. Guarneri said she no longer believes in treating disease. Instead, she focuses on integrative medicine and lifestyle changes that lead to health. She showed us how we not only had to look at our food choices, when aspiring to retain or regain health, we also needed to be looking at our emotional well-being, environmental impacts, and our level of community support— all the things we are exposed to over our lifetime. All of them have their own unique impact on our individual health.

When we look at diseases like high blood pressure, coronary disease, diabetes, and even cancer, we have a tendency to blame our genetics for those diseases. Who hasn’t gone to a doctor and been asked to look at your family history to assess your predisposition to a disease? According to Dr. Guarneri, genetics isn’t necessarily the culprit. “You know that genes are just the tip of the iceberg, right,” she said.

According to Dr. Guarneri’s research, there have been very few, if any, changes in genes over the past 10,000 years. “Genes didn’t change,” she emphasized. “We did. The food has. The planet has.” Notable changes she shared were the hybridization of wheat, the addition of trans fat, and the addition of high fructose corn syrup. She blames these and other less-than-healthy lifestyle choices for contributing to the health mess that she says are facing. (Her comments brought to mind super sized fries, three patty hamburgers, sodas or drinks laced with high sugar contents, and devitalized processed foods.)

Our food choices can be very impactful Dr. Guarneri explained. She reported on a study done in 1999 that followed people with heart disease for four years. During the study the patients were switched to a Mediterranean diet that included fruit, fish and whole grains. Those in the study had a 72% reduction in heart attacks. “What you don’t see in this diet,” she mentioned “is mashed potatoes and cream. You don’t see waffles with cream on top and syrup. You don’t see buns that are this big [holding her hands several inches apart] or muffins that are this big [spreading her hands even further apart], gestures that earned a chuckle from the audience.

She said the research is out there that shows how our food choices can change health issues. Dr. Guarneri shared study after study showing the impact of food choices on health. A 2002 study done by the Journal of American Medical Association showed a diet of whole grains, vegetables and omega threes can prevent heart disease. Another study in 2004 showed that inflammation and insulin resistance can be decreased with a Mediterranean diet. Another study done in 2013 showed that people who used olive oil had a 30% reduction in cardiovascular disease. “The research is there,” she emphasized. “When we see this kind of research we need to say, why aren’t we doing this?” she questioned. “And especially, why aren’t we doing it in hospitals.”

There are good things happening with healthy food choices though, she shared. A program coordinated by the Center for prevention of Blue Cross and Blue Shield in Minnesota has a fresh fruits and vegetable prescription program is one example she provided. The program allows physicians at North Point Health and Wellness center in Minneapolis, to prescribe fruits and vegetables, redeemable at a nearby Farmer’s Market. “This is a paradigm shift,” Dr. Guarneri said with enthusiasm. “I love it.”

Dr. Guanereri made it clear, however that it is not just our food choices that affect our health. “Seventy to ninety percent of the diseases we see are related to how we live our lives,” she noted. Adding, “you can eat all the brussel sprouts that you want, but if you are angry and pissed off, it’s probably not going to help your heart.”

We learned from Dr. Guarneri that we can also make other lifestyle changes that help us support our health goals. Lifestyle changes include looking at the individual holistically — physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually she noted. To press her point that there is more ways to address health issues than food, Dr. Guarneri shared the results of a study done on an Amish community.

Researchers wanted to study this Amish community because of their genetics. They all had the fat gene, which she called a “thrifty gene.” Those that carry this gene have a predisposition to obesity. Yet, no one in this particular community was fat. “Why aren’t they fat, she asked? Why this genetic predisposition had not expressed itself in the health of these individuals was a mystery. What made this community fertile ground for study on a subject such as weight loss is because they all live the same way they have lived for 300 years, without any dietary constraints. Eggs, pancakes, beef, cheese, mashed potatoes, gravy, butter, bread and sugary deserts were common daily fare. Their physical activities were logged for seven days and a large group of them were monitored with pedometers. The study provided insights into the relationship between high amounts of work-related physical activity and obesity. Dr. Guarneri shared that reading the pedometers showed they walked an average of 18,000 steps a day. “Who walks 18,000 steps a day,” she asked. The crowd laughed when someone in the audience responded, “Nurses.” The point made, however, was that it was the high levels of activity that allowed members of this community to override their genetic predisposition.

Showing that lifestyle changes can be more than just increasing activity or food choices, was a huge part of Dr. Guarneri’s message. Addressing mind, emotions and spirit are also a key factors in maintaining health. “Lifestyle is an intervention,” she said, noting that it is not just for patients, but for all of us.

She applauded Healing Touch Practitioners for their work, noting that integrating the biofields, which addresses those key factors, can have a huge impact on an individual’s health. Dr. Guarneri shared that she has seen her patients become whole again when she has incorporated HT in their interventions. She also mentioned that we are starting to understand why HT works using the language of science as a mechanism to explain its mystery.

Gene arrays, the language of science, are one of the mechanisms that help explain the impact of lifestyle choices. Dr. Guarneri mentioned a study done by Dr. Gene Ornish, that looked at males with prostate cancer. They put the men on a vegan diet, taught them yoga and meditation, had them sit in support groups to talk about what was going on in their lives, and had them exercise. The slide she presented had one side that showed the turned on cancer genes prior to lifestyle change. The other side showed that 500 cancer genes were turned off after lifestyle changes were implemented. “Five hundred,” she emphasized. “We have the ability through genetics to start to understand that we can turn gene expression off,” she noted. “This is powerful medicine,” she concluded.

Another study that Dr. Guarneri participated in showed diet, mood support and exercise can actually reverse plaque in vessels. It was a study that got her started on her journey to creating health rather than just treating disease. “When I started to see angiograms with complete plaque reversal — 91% reduction in chest pain in these patients— I had to wake up and start to think differently,” she said.

Dr. Guraneri's presentation touched on the impact our emotions and mental state can have on our health, and may lead us to make certain lifestyle choices. “What kinds of emotional traumas have we had in our life?,” she asked. “Sometimes we can blame it [health issues] on all sorts of other things,” said Dr. Guarneri. “And sometimes we have to go to that deeper level and be honest with ourselves about what is happening.”

Dr. Guarneri told a story about a woman who had been going to a weight loss clinic in San Diego, run by Dr. Vince Felitti. The clinic treats people who carry 200-300 pounds of extra weight. One of his patients was a woman who had lost over 100 pounds and had attempted to commit suicide. To Dr. Felitti's credit, she explained, he took the woman into his office to find out what happened. She was looking great, so he didn't understand what led to her actions. He learned from her that "looking great" was the issue. She had been raped and molested as a child and had put on the extra weight so no guy would come anywhere near her. After losing the weight one of her coworkers suggested they go to dinner because she was now looking really good. That is when she went home and tried to take her life, said Dr. Guarneri.

That conversation led Dr. Felitti to review the history of all his overweight patients for adverse childhood events. What he found, explained Dr. Guarneri, was "children that come from families whose parents are drinking, fighting, or someone's in jail, they find comfort in things like food. Comfort in things like alcohol. They find comfort in cigarettes and IV drugs." He went on to find the more trauma you have the more addictions you have later, she noted. "That was eye opening to me as a physician," said Dr. Guarneri "I have to be honest with you. Many times in my practice I said, why can't they just exercise and eat right," she added. "I have found in my practice that whenever someone carries extra weight, they know nutrition better than I do. They say I could teach a class, Dr. Guarneri." She said that is her clue that she is dealing with issues other than not knowing how to eat right. It alerts her to look for underlying emotional issues.

The effects of stress on our bodies is another area where Dr. Guarneri encouraged a change in lifestyle choices. Stress, she defined, is a state with experiences where there is a mismatch between perceived demands and our perceived ability to cope. "Does anybody here say yes, when they really mean no," she asked, eliciting a chuckle from the crowd. "As a cardiologist, I started to realize that every drug I was giving was to block stress hormones," she mentioned. She said stress causes weight gain, high cholesterol, increased blood pressure, cause headaches, disrupts sleep, causes gastrointestinal issues, it can cause addictions, and it can impact how we age — among other things.

Lifestyle changes suggested by Dr. Guarneri were learning how to meditate, and adding yoga or exercise to daily routines, or get a pet. A stress study she shared involved having the individual put their hand in a bucket of ice, which caused their blood pressure to rise. When animals were added to the setting, the blood pressure did not increase. On the other hand, she noted, "When they put them in the room with their spouse," she said leaving the thought dangling, which caused another outburst of laughter. Even taking 20 minutes for a centering or grounding exercise or developing a mantra that can be used throughout the day can reduce the impact of stress. Changing how we respond to events is also important, she expressed — looking for the positive and good. Dr. Guarneri lives what she preaches. At the beginning of her presentation there were some technical difficulties. Rather than fret, she lead the audience in a Kundalini Yoga exercise — in lieu of worrying and getting stressed out about the slide presentation issues.

According to Dr. Guarneri, isolation also has a health impact. She quoted Sri Swami Satchinanda who said "The I in Illness is Isolation. The W in wellness is we." She said the experience of social exclusion activated normal regions in the brain typically associated with physical pain. "Imagine what kids feel like when they are excluded at school," she pondered. She also said that social connection — friends, family, neighbors, or colleagues — improve our odds of survival by 50%. She touched on concerns about how we are isolating ourselves into our iPhones and how losing the personal connection is so important to our health. "We are humans. Most of us are meant to be in a tribe. Most of us are meant to be touched — especially older people. No one touches them anymore," she cautioned. Low social interaction, she noted, is equivalent to smoking 15 packs of cigarettes a day; equivalent to being an alcoholic; more harmful than not exercising; and twice as harmful as obesity.

Speaking to the benefits of tribe, Dr. Guarneri talked about a study done in Roseto, Pennsylvania, where they had a strikingly low mortality rate from heart attacks in comparison to the surrounding communities. They were

overweight. They were smoking cigarettes. They were diabetic. Yet, she explained, they weren't having heart attacks. Their community was made up of three generational households that did everything together like eating and going to church — displaying traditional values where there is always someone around. As the children aged and moved away, the whole system fell apart and the heart attacks became equivalent to the surrounding communities. “Researchers concluded that it was the three generation households, the community that these people were living in that protected them from heart attacks,” she stated.

Even depressed people can benefit immensely when they feel socially supported. “It negates the negative effect of depression,” said Dr Guarneri. Another benefit of community she cited was the impact of social support on the immune system. A Rhino virus study showed those in the study, who had sufficient social support, avoided getting colds, even when the virus was inserted directly into their nose.

You can't look at lifestyle choices without looking at how our health is intertwined with the the health of the planet. We are impacted by the foods we eat, whether it be animal or vegetable and our lifestyle choices impact the planet, shared Dr. Guarneri.

Dr. Guarneri's shared some of her research on the agricultural industry with slides that focused mainly on beef, poultry farming and pesticides. In looking at the beef industry, her slides showed that the beef industry is the number one contributor to the greenhouse gas effect. It also consumes enormous amounts of water to keep that machine going. “Forty-three countries today suffer from water scarcity,” she noted. Her statistics showed that two-thirds of the worlds population are living under water stressed conditions. “You cannot live without water,” she stated. “Putting it in a plastic bottle and selling it at the airport is not the solution,” she quipped. Tying this information to our food choices she added, “If you decide to switch your diet from the typical Western diet to the more Mediterranean diet, it is even better if you go vegetarian.” She continued, “You can decrease greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption, energy consumption and agriculture land use. Do you want to plant trees or do you want to use the land to raise cattle?,” she asked. She mentioned that when she gave this same talk in Canada, it was not very popular, which earned a chuckle from the crowd.

Dr. Guarneri made note that, if people choose to eat animals, they should be sure they know what the animals eat because it could impact their health. She cited the World Health Organizations number one issue in the world right now is antibiotic resistance. “They are linking this resistance to the misuse of antibiotics in agriculture,” she said. “There are countries now, particularly in Scandinavia and Europe that are banning the use of antibiotics in animals,” she continued. She shared some surprising statistics about this prophylactic use of antibiotics: The amount of antibiotics sold for meat and poultry production in 2011 was \$29.9 million. The amount of antibiotics sold to treat people was \$7.7 million. She suggested that they are giving the antibiotics to animals, not because they are sick, but because they are housed too close together and they don't want them to get sick. “They are finding farmers coming in with these weirdo infections that are resistant to everything,” she mentioned. A look back showed the farmers were feeding their animals antibiotics, causing a resistance to the medication in the farmers. “Exposure to the antibiotics fed to animals causes the farmers to be resistant to antibiotics when they are sick,” she stated emphatically.

Moving from animals to vegetables, Dr. Guarneri shared what her research showed. Atrazine, which is a common herbicide has now been linked to insulin resistance and obesity. “So, it's not so much to say you are overweight,” she stated. “Maybe it's because of the pesticides and herbicides that you are getting.” She added that not everyone that is overweight develops diabetes. “There is genetic interaction,” she said. Her data showed those who develop diabetes are the ones that are eating lots of persistent organic pollutants and pesticides. She indicated that there is a lot of empirical evidence showing that environmental toxins consisting of organic pollutants affect mitochondrial function —the energy of the cell — and induces insulin resistance.

It is not only the soil that we need to look to with concern. Dr. Guarneri mentioned. Arsenic in drinking water has been linked to kidney disease; air pollution causes seven million deaths a year; and the use of plastic were

among her concerns for individual and planetary health. She mentioned that plastic constitutes 90% of all the trash floating in the ocean. In some areas it outweighs plankton by a ratio of six to one. "Then you start thinking about those fish that we are eating," she stated, causing a chuckle.

Of her presentation, Dr. Guarneri said she wasn't there to horrify the audience. "We have to wake up," she said. "We have to wake up as a world, and as a country because the tsunami is here and we're rearranging deck chairs on the titanic." Citing the United Nations Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, she said that human activities is putting such strain on the natural functions of earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystem to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted. "This is not like some crazy person," she argued. "This is hundreds of scientists and researches. Yet we are still arguing about whether or not there is climate change," she said [adding air quotes]. Additionally, she noted that it is the country's and the world's poorest that suffer from the poor health of our planet. Dr. Guarneri shared a quote from Pope Francis: "We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis, which is both social and environmental. The same mindset which stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming also stand in the way of achieving the goal of eliminating poverty.

Dr. Guarneri told the audience not to take her word for what she said in her presentation. She encouraged listeners to go out and get educated. She suggested sites like the Environmental Working Group, The World Health Organization among others. "That's all I ask you to do," she noted.

Everybody can make their own choice but there is something called the precautionary principle she mentioned. "It is the primary mechanism for implementing basic tenets of ecologic medicine," she said. "It is medicine that says we need to live in unity with the planet. Anything that we do to the planet affects us. So it's good medicine," she continued. The principle argues that science and industry has to fully assess the impact of their activities before they impose them upon the public and the environment.

Dr. Guarneri encouraged the audience to make an impact with our choices. She noted that as a consumer, we don't have to support behavior that does not philosophically align with the changes we want to see that impact our health. Some of the things she said we could do were: be a conscious consumer; stop using plastic; recycle; eat less meat; go organic; and purchase items that support the environment, health or fair trade. These may seem like common sense, but when she asked her Spiritual teacher why people don't do what is good for them, he responded: "Information leads to knowledge, but practice leads to transformation

If what Dr. Guarneri presented moves you, put the knowledge into practice. You don't need to be preachy, she noted. "We can bring out these concepts just by mirroring them. Just by being the change we want to see."

Dr. Guarneri was available after her presentation to sign her new book: *108 Pearls to Awaken Your Healing Potential*. It is her perspective, as a cardiologist, for translating the science of health and healing into practice. In the book, she blends modern science and ancient wisdom to offer steps you can take to awaken the healing potential of your body, mind and spirit. Throughout the book she presents 108 pearls, which is based on the number of beads in a mala, as she takes you step by step from just surviving to thriving.

Additional Interesting Facts Presented by Dr. Guarneri:

- The amount of money needed each year to provide reproductive health for all women in developing countries is \$12 billion. The amount of money spent annually on perfumes in Europe and the United States is \$12 billion.
- The amount of money needed each year to provide water and sanitation to all people in developing countries is \$9 billion. In the United states we spend \$8 billion on cosmetics.

- Quote from Dr. Guarneri after presenting the first two bullet items: “Maybe we need to look worse and smell more.”
- The money needed each year to provide basic health and nutritional needs in the developing world is \$13 billion. The money spent in Europe and the United States each year on pet food is \$17billion.
- The amount of money needed each year to provide basic education for all people in developing nations is \$6 billion. The amount of money spent on the military is \$780 billion.
- The combined wealth of the world’s richest 225 people is \$1 trillion. The combined income of the world’s 2.5 billion people is \$1 trillion.