

# Nutrition science: a chronic deficiency amongst healthcare professionals?

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## 'Let food by thy medicine' (Hippocrates)

Since starting medical school, 3 years ago, my attitude towards nutrition science has changed rather dramatically. I certainly didn't question why we only had a single workshop discussing nutrition; in fact I thought even that hour was a bit unnecessary. A few years later, my views couldn't be more different. The aim of this article is to encourage a new perspective on nutrition's vital role in the future of medicine.

The issue I had was thinking about the bigger picture. Most of medicine, in my mind, meant treating a patient's acute and unavoidable illness and sending them on their way. However, my eyes slowly opened when I began to appreciate how the majority of what we treat is tragically preventable. The World Health Organization (WHO) stated in its published plans for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) that 'most of the premature deaths from NCDs are largely preventable'.<sup>1</sup> Considering that, in the UK, approximately 89% of deaths are attributable to NCDs,<sup>2</sup> I was shocked to realise how little we even discuss the prevention of these chronic diseases in medical training.

The Global Burden of Disease study is the most comprehensive observational epidemiological study to date, examining the most significant risk factors for mortality and morbidity across 195 countries. Published in *The Lancet*, this study found that, in the UK, diet is the second leading risk factor for death and disability after tobacco.<sup>3</sup> The health implications of smoking are common knowledge, but what about diet?

I naively used to think that all we could do was tell patients to limit their intake of fast food, but as it happens there is a wealth of evidence on nutrition science, which is rarely discussed in medical training. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) have specific dietary guidelines for preventing our leading killer in the UK, stating that 'reducing general consumption of saturated fat is crucial' in preventing cardiovascular disease.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the World Cancer Research Fund has clear advice on how to eat for cancer protection.<sup>5</sup> Both of these recommendations share similar dietary staples, such as whole grains and vegetables, with both bodies

encouraging reductions in saturated fat.<sup>4,5</sup> These recommendations are made from evidence regarding the prevention and management of these diseases. However, medical students are sparsely exposed to this kind of life-changing science,<sup>6</sup> which suggests that patients could make simple swaps for a healthier and longer life.

Despite patients trusting their doctors to give nutrition advice,<sup>6</sup> I have found that there is very little formal training for healthcare professionals regarding nutrition science. This was reflected in a *Lancet*-published systematic review, including 25 medical curricula from five different continents, concluding that 'medical students are not supported to provide high-quality, effective nutrition care'.<sup>7</sup> We need attitudes of both patients and healthcare professionals to shift towards understanding the fundamental use of food in medicine. The solution to this mainstream ignorance regarding nutrition in health begins with addressing the issue and calling for change. The use of lifestyle medicine is vital in tackling the rising burden of NCDs, which is currently overwhelming the NHS. Organisations like Nutritank, a national student-led project, are attempting to raise awareness of the role of nutrition in medicine.<sup>8</sup>

However, more pressure on medical schools and public health campaigns to educate doctors and their patients is essential. I would like to see a health system where doctors are fully trained in nutrition science and even prescribe certain foods in primary care to put some control back into the hands of their patients.

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