

# The Times They Are A-Changin'

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## ABSTRACT

Change is the one constant in a constantly changing world, including the world of dietetic practice. Over a 40-year career, I have witnessed and participated in many such changes. Key lessons from my early career with Manitoba Agriculture and Manitoba Health include an understanding of the power of teamwork, of the importance of communication skills, of the need for shared knowledge and expertise, and of ways to connect nutrition messages with food and eating. Later, my work as director of education in a family medicine residency program taught me the value of building a portfolio of knowledge and skills and of working with families. Similarly, my work with the Organization for Cooperation in Overseas Development led me to appreciate the need for cultural sensitivity in our work. Opportunities with Dietitians of Canada have shown me that future directions must include continued interdisciplinary development of policy and position papers. Other important challenges include determining issues relevant to various areas of dietetic practice, working to achieve Vision 2020 goals, and inspiring and nurturing new leadership among younger Dietitians of Canada members.

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## RÉSUMÉ

Le changement est l'une des constantes dans un monde en perpétuel changement, et cela vaut aussi pour le monde de la pratique de la diététique. Au cours de mes 40 ans de carrière, j'ai été témoin de beaucoup de ces changements et j'y ai contribué. Mes débuts chez Agriculture Manitoba et Santé Manitoba m'ont fait comprendre le pouvoir du travail d'équipe, l'importance des habiletés en communication, la nécessité de partager les connaissances et expertises, et des moyens de lier les messages sur la nutrition aux aliments et à l'alimentation. Par la suite, mon travail de directrice de l'éducation dans un programme de résidence en médecine familiale m'a fait découvrir la valeur de travailler auprès des familles et de créer un portfolio de connaissances et d'habiletés. De plus, mon travail auprès de la Organization for Cooperation in Overseas Development m'a montré l'importance de la sensibilisation aux réalités culturelles dans le cadre de notre travail. Quant aux occasions dont j'ai bénéficié au sein des Diététistes du Canada, elles m'ont appris que nos orientations futures doivent prendre en considération un développement interdisciplinaire continu des politiques et des exposés de position. D'autres défis importants comprennent la définition des questions touchant divers secteurs de la pratique de la diététique, la réalisation des objectifs de la Vision 2020, et la capacité à inspirer et favoriser un nouveau leadership au sein des jeunes membres des Diététistes du Canada.

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## INTRODUCTION

Bob Dylan wrote the protest song *The Times They Are A-Changin'* in 1963 (1), intending it to be an anthem of change that perhaps would inspire and empower people to reach beyond their grasp and make a difference. Dylan's song of change speaks to the heart of what I want to share with you. My career has spanned 40 years, during which I've seen many changes in our profession and been privileged to learn from and be mentored by professional colleagues, friends, and family. My experiences and my mentors have taught me some key things about leading change and about taking advantage of the opportunities that change brings. They have also helped me appreciate the importance of change as a renewing and revitalizing force.

Let me highlight some of the significant changes that have shaped my growth, and share some of my thoughts about capitalizing on change in the future.

### Changing career directions

Miss Shortreed, my high school foods and nutrition teacher, inspired me to become a dietitian. In her classroom, nutrition wasn't just about what I could read in a book. She had the knack of turning her lessons into a story, drawn from her earlier practical experience as a clinical dietitian. She taught me a key lesson about what we now call knowledge translation: while nutrition knowledge is the foundation of practice,

the ability to translate that knowledge and make it meaningful and relevant to others is an art, equally important for successful practice.

I started my career as a clinical dietitian, but while I appreciated the importance of this area of practice, I was drawn to a focus in health promotion. After completing a master of science in nutrition, I landed the position of nutrition specialist with the Home Economics Directorate of Manitoba Agriculture. I shared the role of nutrition specialist with Lynda Clark (Lowry), working as a team with home economist specialists with strong roots in extension education.

Using an assessment of the needs of home economists and dietitians who worked for Manitoba Agriculture and Manitoba Health, we developed innovative educational approaches and resources, and trained others to be effective educators. We developed a resource lending library of evidence-based “ready to teach” nutrition programs to strengthen the capacity of province-wide educators to deliver consistent, quality information. We often connected our nutrition messages with food, developing courses in gourmet cooking on a budget, wok cooking, and food preservation, as well as courses on promoting healthy weights.

This was in 1975 to 1985, well before web-based technology was available for easy dissemination of practice guidance and support tools. What an opportunity dietitians have today to use our trusted position and our specialized knowledge of food and nutrition to work with technology experts and develop, deliver, and evaluate innovative programs designed in usable and easily accessible formats.

**Lesson 1:** While I learned many lessons from my work with the Home Economics Directorate, four things stand out. First, I developed great respect for the power of teamwork and team building that draws on members’ extraordinary talents and creativity to produce the best results, well beyond what one person can achieve. In my experience, overcoming obstacles and solving problems as a group result in better decision-making, and celebrating achievements is always sweeter when others share that success.

**Lesson 2:** Second, I learned the importance of developing persuasive communication skills to sell new ideas and to obtain support for change. We experienced big changes back in the days of the Home Economics Directorate; departments and mandates changed, but we never lost staff. My coworkers and I never felt left out of the communication loop, largely because of our director’s skill in managing that change process, keeping us informed, and advocating for the value of our knowledge and skills under new administrative mandates.

**Lesson 3:** Third, I developed a great appreciation for the importance of sharing knowledge and expertise by training others and providing trusted resources to extend our reach in promoting healthy eating and managing family resources.

**Lesson 4:** A final lesson from this stage of my career is that, while we ground our nutrition messages in science, we also need to draw on our rich home economics foundation to con-

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nect our nutrition messages with food. A central tenet and unique skill in our professional practice is translating the complex subject of nutrition into the everyday language of consumers. A great example of this form of knowledge translation in practice today is the highly successful Nutrition Month Campaign—Celebrate Food from Field to Table. The Nutrition Month Campaign is also a wonderful example of successful collaboration

with food industry partners to achieve common goals with nutrition messaging.

### Changing a professional culture

**Family medicine residency program:** In 1985, my career took a path along a road less travelled, to make a change in a professional culture. When consumers are asked who the most credible source of nutrition advice is, dietitians are top of mind. But when asked where they get their nutrition information, the family physician outranks us, largely because of consumers’ lack of direct access to dietitians (2). When a position teaching nutrition in a family practice teaching unit became available in Winnipeg in the mid-1980s, I saw an opportunity to build the nutrition knowledge and counselling skills of family medicine residents at that first point of contact in primary health care. In this new role teaching adult learners, I also saw the advantage of building my knowledge base in adult education. A few years and another university degree later—this time a master’s degree in adult education—I was promoted to the position of director of education in the family medicine residency program. This was a precedent-setting event, as previously this position had always been held by a family physician.

**Educational work overseas:** During the period that I worked with the residency program, I was given time to pursue exciting volunteer work through a Manitoba-based agency, Organization for Cooperation in Overseas Development (OCOD). The purpose of OCOD was to strengthen the capacity and support the professional development of Caribbean teachers. For six consecutive summers I accompanied a team of educators to several Caribbean territories to provide two-week workshops on teaching techniques within our respective areas of subject matter expertise. Through that experience, I learned the value of versatility and flexibility in my practice. Often what we had prepared to teach just wasn’t appropriate for that setting, and we didn’t have other tools and resources at our fingertips to use instead. We had to rely on our own creativity and resourcefulness, and of course draw on our team’s experience, to correct our approach rapidly and be prepared to try something new the next day. My Caribbean experience gave me a wonderful opportunity for cultural exchange, introduced me to different foods and traditions, and gave me a deep appreciation for the importance of cultural sensitivity in our work.

**Nutrition services review:** While I was still with the residency program, I was approached by Manitoba Health to volunteer as the chair for a nutrition services review for the province. Through a partnership struck between representatives of Man-

Manitoba Health and the nutrition community, we compiled data on Manitobans' current nutritional status and conducted an environmental scan to identify nutrition services, interventions, and resources across the province. We also compiled evidence for the cost-effectiveness of nutrition interventions. As a result of our work we submitted 43 recommendations for consideration in the development of policy options for the delivery of province-wide nutrition services. This nutrition services review succeeded in stimulating action in a number of arenas and in placing nutrition issues on the policy agenda of government (3).

**Presidency of the CDA:** During my tenure with the family medicine program, the membership of the Canadian Dietetic Association (CDA) accorded me the honour of the presidency during the transformational year leading up to CDA becoming Dietitians of Canada (DC). Those were unsettling times in many respects, but also a time of exhilaration as we embarked on a landmark change for our profession. This change set the course for DC to become an advocacy organization with a strong collective voice for greater impact on public policy, and thus the health of Canadians. That transformational change was truly teamwork and leadership at its best—with staff and volunteers working together—to develop a unique and effective professional association.

**Lessons learned:** What were the lessons that I took away from my position with family practice? Certainly one is the importance of building a portfolio of knowledge and skills that will position you for future career changes, and of having the vision to take advantage of those opportunities. Advancing my training in adult education was an important stepping stone to becoming the director of education for the residency program. It also opened the door to diverse experiences teaching nutrition abroad, and to effecting change in the delivery of provincial nutrition services. In addition, it opened my eyes to the important work to be done at the policy level, and later prompted me to work with DC to move important policy issues for dietitians forward.

My work in family practice also brought me face to face with the reality of childhood obesity, and with the lack of resources available at the time to support families and their children to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. My friend and colleague Patti Clark (Tweed) and I coauthored our own self-help resource featuring two kids called Cal and Julie (4). The book focused on building a child's self-image, promoting discovery about the behaviours that lead to excess weight gain, and how to make positive changes in health habits to reverse that trend. Our publisher, Fifth House, effectively engaged the media and supported us on a Canada-wide promotional tour. One of the highlights of that media promotion was an interview with Stuart McLean of the famed *Vinyl Cafe*. Stuart was the summertime host on Peter Gzowski's CBC radio program *This Country in the Morning*. Patti and I really thought we had hit the big time with that coverage, as well as with a

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program spot on *Canada AM* and many interviews with print news media. While we didn't exactly change the course of childhood obesity with our book, we made a difference to hundreds of families and their children. I hope this story captures the imagination of some would-be authors among you. Nutrition needs imaginative, creative writers with the ability to translate complex information

and make it meaningful and relevant to consumers.

In 1999, while I was still working with the residency training program, I took a 15-month secondment with Manitoba Health to work on a team tasked with establishing policy and supporting the implementation of primary care centres in Manitoba. During this secondment, the important role of dietitians on primary care interdisciplinary teams became clear. In summer 2000, when I joined DC as a staff member responsible for policy communications, I was prepared to provide leadership in the development of DC's first role paper on Dietitians in Primary Health Care (PHC) (5). The role paper describes the range and types of services registered dietitians provide in PHC, and provides the evidence base for dietitians' effectiveness in improving health outcomes for Canadians. It was a proud moment for dietitians when we heard John Abbott, CEO of the Health Council of Canada, commend DC for this role paper in his keynote address at our 2010 annual meeting. The role paper is an important advocacy document for our profession. We must continue to add to the evidence base on the effectiveness of dietitians in improving client health outcomes by building evaluation into our practice, and publishing these results. We must also use our role paper to advocate with health care decision-makers to increase Canadians' accessibility to dietitians.

### Changing policy and practice

Another aspect of change is building dietitians' capacity to bring about change in policy and practice. In *The Necessary Revolution: How Individuals and Organizations Are Working Together to Create a Sustainable World* (6), Peter Senge uses a famous Margaret Mead quotation: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, concerned citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Senge adds that this change "depend[s] on their ability to build larger networks." I agree that collaborative networks are key to change, but I think there is another defining element—developing strong relationships within those networks. It's about gaining the commitment of the heart in the work that we do together. When I see what dietitians have been able to accomplish it's always that passion and commitment of the heart that have brought about successful change.

**Policy and position papers:** For example, as DC's director of public affairs over the past several years, one of my key roles was leading the development of policy and position papers for the profession. One of our most recent policy papers is *Promoting Optimal Monitoring of Child Growth in Canada* (7),

recommending the adoption of World Health Organization (WHO) growth charts for Canadian children. The Canadian Paediatric Society, The College of Family Physicians of Canada, the Community Health Nurses of Canada, and the Public Health Agency of Canada collaborated in the development of that policy paper. It was the vision of Donna Secker, clinical dietitian at the Hospital for Sick Children; 10 years ago, she saw the importance of collaboration among all health professionals involved in promoting children's healthy development and monitoring their growth. In her role as DC's liaison to the CPS Nutrition Committee, Donna authored our first collaborative statement (8). In the course of that work she was instrumental in helping to build a strong interdisciplinary network. When the new WHO growth standards were published in 2006, Donna's commitment to this work saw her step forward to author our new policy statement. The DC Pediatric Nutrition Network was also actively engaged in developing tools to support the adoption of the WHO growth charts.

Indeed, an interdisciplinary network was a key factor in the development and dissemination of the statement and its supporting materials. However, I'm convinced it was the commitment of the heart that kept Donna, the advisory committee members, and the DC Pediatric Nutrition Network engaged to see that project through. This is truly a success story that is changing practice in Canada; it is built on networks, yes, but just as important, it is built on that commitment of the heart.

**Practice-based Evidence in Nutrition:** The story of Practice-based Evidence in Nutrition (PEN) is another great example of shared vision, networks, and commitment of the heart. The initial vision that Marsha Sharp, Jayne Thirsk, Corinne Eisenbraun, and I held was of supporting dietitians to be evidence-based practitioners in an environment where dietitians lacked the time and skills to find, appraise, and synthesize the plethora of relevant scientific literature on their own and apply it to practice. Again, advisory committee members with this goal firmly embedded in their hearts supported the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of the decision support tool now recognized and adopted by members, dietitian call centres across Canada, and dietitians beyond our borders in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.

Those hearts (and minds) that grasped the vision and were inspired to help build PEN included many dietitians. Lisa Forster-Coull, provincial nutritionist in British Columbia, recognized PEN's potential in providing the evidence foundation for BC's dietitian contact centre, and was instrumental in establishing sustained support for PEN. In her role as director of the Dietitian Advisory Service in Ontario, Helen Haresign has worked tirelessly to build that dietitian contact centre, and she, along with Jayne Thirsk, director of PEN, have expanded the reach of PEN within Canada and abroad. Many authors and reviewers have also committed their hearts to developing the PEN database content that makes it such a robust and powerful tool—one that will have a profound impact on the way

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dietitians practise, not just now but far into the future.

**Nutrition policy and regulatory arena:** My final story about relationship building beyond networks and nurturing that commitment of the heart concerns my work in the nutrition policy and food regulatory arena. Without a doubt, one of the most challenging aspects of my career has been gathering and synthesizing

dietitians' input on such diverse issues as discretionary fortification of foods, advertising of food and beverages to children, reduction of trans fat and sodium in foods, and even *Canada's Food Guide*. We each view these issues through a lens shaped by our knowledge grounded in science, our diverse work settings, and our personal values. Creating dietitians' voice on these issues is all about meeting the challenge of building relationships, gaining trust, finding common ground in the diversity of perspectives, and encouraging members' commitment of the heart to help shape our viewpoint. My hat is off to the DC Regulatory Affairs Advisory Group, which helped me steer much of this work.

**Professional opportunity and fulfillment:** These are some of the professional changes that have enriched my life. Looking back, I can't imagine a more fulfilling career with so many opportunities to grow as a person and a professional. In my career, I've been fortunate to have many opportunities for change, and in my mind change has always equalled opportunity—a new meaning for the acronym "CEO." If you want to be the CEO of your life and career, seize those opportunities that change can provide. I believe those who are successful have learned the importance of embracing change, using opportunities to make change happen for causes they are passionate about, and seeing change as a means for renewal and revitalization. As George Bernard Shaw said, "This is the true joy in life—being used for a purpose.... I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live (9)."

### What of change for the future?

Dietetics will continue to be challenged with unprecedented change in the future. Our document *Vision 2020* (10) portrays the preferred future for dietitians and how we will rise to the challenges ahead. We cannot take on every nutrition issue that is the flavour of the day. Rather, as a profession we need to consider our focus carefully, determine what is most relevant to our areas of expertise, and consider what resources we have to address them. One leadership role, identified in *Vision 2020*, is dietitians' work as agents of change in the food supply and in establishing food and nutrition policy for Canada. The United Kingdom Sustainable Development Commission report (11) points to food and food insecurity as defining issues of the next century, and it must surely be addressed in Canada's national food policy. Currently, important work is underway in Canada to shape such policy (12). While dietitians are already engaged, I suggest that this is an area in which we need to strengthen our voice and take a more prominent leadership role. This idea



brings me full circle to the work in which I was engaged as a new graduate in the early 1970s, when those involved in agriculture and health worked together closely to improve families' physical and economic health. This is where a real need exists for interdisciplinary teamwork, collaboration, and commitment of the heart.

Another critically important challenge is ensuring that we inspire and nurture new leadership from our younger members. As a young graduate, I never hesitated about joining my professional association. That's not the case with many of our new graduates today, and yet young members are fundamental if our profession is to continue to have a strong membership base, and if our voice is to have an impact. Younger members also are critical for the innovation needed to address the challenging issues we face. According to Peter Senge (6), fundamental innovation rarely comes from the mainstream or the centres of power. We need to look to the periphery, to our younger members, whose commitment to the status quo is low, and whose hearts and minds are most open to the new ways of solving problems. Leadership isn't just an affair of the head—it's also an affair of the heart (6). One can't imagine leaders getting up day after day and putting in the long hours and the hard work needed to accomplish extraordinary things, without having their hearts in the work. Building the leadership to follow and to address new challenges necessitates capturing the hearts of those who are not yet engaged. It's up to us to inspire and engage those smart young minds, as they are our future leaders.

Let me leave you with some words of leadership from Clarissa Pinkola Estés's *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (13). They've been an inspiration to me because they speak to a powerful force within us, which is filled with good instincts, passionate creativity, and ageless knowing: "Let us keep in mind that the best cannot hide. Meditation, education, all the dream analysis, all the knowledge of God's green acre is of no value if one keeps to oneself or one's chosen few.... [Wild Woman] leaves footprints behind for us to try on for size.... So come out, come out wherever you are. Leave deep footprints because you can. Forgive as much as you can, forget a little, and create a lot. What you do today influences the rest of your life."

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