

# Imagine a World Where...

## 2008 Ryley-Jeffs Memorial Lecture

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### Abstract

The health and well-being of individuals and the prosperity of the country require a well-nourished population. Canadians face unprecedented challenges to the goal of healthy eating and physical activity. The challenges are complex and dietitians have a collective responsibility to respond as thoughtful, competent practitioners. As we embrace the future, we need to understand our past and reflect on how we will create a future that will support nutritional health and well-being for all Canadians. Dietitians, in partnership with others, must play a key role. (Can J Diet Prac Res 2008;69:155-158) (DOI: 10.3148/69.3.2008.155)

### Résumé

La santé et le bien-être des personnes ainsi que la prospérité du pays requièrent une population bien nourrie. Pour atteindre les objectifs en matière d'alimentation saine et d'exercice physique, les Canadiens doivent relever des défis sans précédent. Ces défis sont complexes, et les diététistes ont la responsabilité collective de les affronter en tant que praticiennes rigoureuses et compétentes. Pour aller de l'avant, nous avons besoin de comprendre notre passé et de réfléchir à la façon de créer un avenir qui appuiera la santé et le bien-être nutritionnels de tous les Canadiens. Les diététistes, en partenariat avec d'autres professionnels, doivent jouer un rôle de premier plan. (Rev can prat rech diétét 2008;69:155-158) (DOI: 10.3148/69.3.2008.155)

### INTRODUCTION

Personal transition provides time to reflect on many things that one considers important. Retirement is one of these pivotal times as is change in one's family. With you, I would like to pause and think about Canada today and reflect on a better tomorrow. My daughter introduced me to the phrase "Whatever floats your boat" to reflect on differences that underpin approaches to an issue. In sharing some personal learnings and transformative moments on my own journey, my hope is that there will be something that will resonate with you to influence your approach to nutrition and health – because we have work to do.

### IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE...

- The eating patterns of Canadians contribute to a healthy, productive population and a better quality of life.
- Diet and activity patterns have resulted in a 50% reduction in chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, and osteoporosis.
- The prevalence of obesity in Canada is less than 10% in adults.
- Nutrition considerations are integrated into health, agriculture, education, social and economic policies and programs.

- Food choices are supported by social and economic environments, physical environments and a health system that intentionally supports individuals to improve and maintain their health.
- Individual capacity and coping skills enable Canadians to enjoy food and select a diet that provides enjoyment and health.
- Poverty is recognized and acknowledged as the real issue in income-related food insecurity and many health-related conditions.
- Addressing health inequalities in Canada receives the attention and action it deserves.
- Resource reallocation in the health sector recognizes the importance of upstream investments and the need for capacity and preoccupation with health care is viewed from a historical perspective.

This is the Canada I want to live in. This is the Canada that dietitians are so well placed to create.

Canadians face unprecedented challenges to the goal of healthy eating. The health care system is going to bankrupt the country unless we can get really serious about changing the environment and providing individuals with appropriate capacity and coping skills to enhance personal health

practices. Dietitians are the health professionals who must rise to this challenge and create a better Canada.

Dietitians are everywhere. We are found working in one-on-one patient counselling in acute care settings; working on population health promotion in community, provincial and federal health departments; working with health charities and other non-government organizations; working with the food industry; working in and with media; working in academia creating new knowledge in areas of need, as well as teaching and mentoring the next generation of nutrition professionals.

We are everywhere we need to be. The question is: how do we individually and collectively in partnership with others work for the best interests of the Canadian public?

### CANADA AND DEMOCRACY

I love Canada. I love Canadians. Democracy is a treasure. Democracy has a history in Canada. Democracy is evolving. We accept that regular elections, independent courts and freedom of the press are fundamental principles. But we recognize that democracy is a work in progress. Democracy is about self government and citizens. It is about citizens as co-producers of a society that we want. Healthy democracy is being in the hearts and minds of Canadians.

The Canadian Policy Research Network held a leadership summit on Shaping Canada's Future in 2008. They examined five themes: citizenship, diversity and Canadian values, productivity and skills, health and aging, and the environment. As health and aging was discussed, the need for evolution in the acute care system to embrace chronic disease management was a significant focus. Dietitians should be leading that discussion. Who is better placed in the acute care system? No-one! And the discussion should expand to include the appropriate balance in a good health system of investment in care and investment upstream. Every theme has implications for nutritional health and well-being: diversity, values, environment, health and aging. We need to show leadership in these discussions.

Our headspace is already poised for leadership, because nutrition evolved in the 1980s within the context of health promotion. As dietitians, we have a long history of focusing on people, individually and collectively embracing the concept of enabling Canadians to take control over and improve their own health. We recognize that health is not evenly distributed among Canadians. Reducing inequalities in health is a fundamental component of health promotion. If we fail to consider these issues, interventions may in fact exacerbate or increase inequalities. A change agenda is needed and this requires informed dialogue, building relationships across differences, and engaging the public.

We have work to do... just look at the facts:

- In 2004, 9.2% of Canadian households experienced income-related food insecurity the previous year. A higher prevalence of food insecurity was observed among Aboriginal people living off reserve, in households

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with young children or households led by a female lone parent (1).

- More than two million Canadians have type 2 diabetes. This number is expected to rise to three million by 2010. First Nations People are disproportionately affected by Type 2 diabetes.
- Fewer and fewer families eat together regularly, a huge contrast to the 80% of adults who said they ate with their family every day, a mere few decades earlier.
- Overweight and obesity is a significant issue – in children

it is a compelling issue. Nearly half of Canadians aged 12 and over are physically inactive in their leisure time (2). Of those aged nine and over, fewer than 30% eat the recommended number of Food Guide Servings of Vegetables and Fruit. Only 50% of children between the ages of two and eight met the recommended number of Food Guide Servings of Milk and Alternatives. Only 13% of all Canadians consumed the recommended number of Food Guide Serv-

ings of two cups of fluid milk on any given day (3).

We know that eating patterns are the most important component in the relationship between nutrition and health. Clearly, the most fundamental nature of the eating patterns of Canadians needs some focused support. When I listen to the current discourse around nutrition, I think it is no wonder that people struggle with confusion. The noise about eating is incredible. So much attention is given to nutrients or specific food components and so little to the pattern of food that is consumed. If I didn't know what to ignore, if I tried to be directed by all that is said, I would not have a clue what to eat. So much air time is spent on things that matter least and so little on things that matter most.

But good things happen when good people work hard, do a good job and work together. There are so many good, competent dietitians working across Canada who represent the best in diligently making their contribution to improving the nutritional health and well-being of Canadians. It has been a privilege to work with so many and to have learned from so many. Also impressive is the calibre of the students and young dietitians that I have met over the past several years. It gives me renewed hope for our future.

As we move forward, lessons from our past include: seeing challenge as an opportunity, recognizing advocacy as a fundamental skill, having respect for people and recognizing their strength, maintaining a sense of humour, having courage, and ensuring that ethics, the moral principles that influence our conduct, are central to our approach and rooted in the public interest.

### THE FIVE Ps: PURPOSE, PERSPECTIVE, PARTNERSHIP, PASSION, POWER

As I weave my remarks, I will call on recent experience that I have had to reflect on five "P"s that if embraced can lead to good things happening.

### **Purpose: Knowing what you want is very powerful**

The development of a national plan of action for nutrition, *Nutrition for Health: Agenda for Action* (4) in the mid 1990s provided a transformative moment. It was a difficult initiative led by a Joint Steering Committee with representation from diverse sectors across the country. As work progressed with a series of studies, a draft plan and extensive consultation, the initiative became stalled with different points of view, resulting in an inability to move forward. As we worked together to proceed, the question of "What are we trying to achieve?" became a focal point. Beyond creating a "plan of action", beyond "improving nutritional health", how did we want the world in which we live to change? This led to a unanimous agreement of purpose: "ensure integration of nutrition considerations into health, agriculture, education, social and economic policies and programs".

This plan has done so much for what has followed, but has led to two other important "learnings". **Great ideas need landing gear as well as wings.** Policy is simply literature until it is implemented. So much time is spent on policy development, but implementation of policy also needs to be taken seriously. There is still much work to be done that was identified over a decade ago. Advocating for social good and looking to make society better is surely the purpose of our work.

Those Canadians with whom we work and with whom we consult provide important wisdom. It was during consultation on the national plan of action that I experienced another transformative moment. The consultation asked stakeholders to "use this space to list other comments you would like to make". Ernie, one of the Canadians who chose to make a comment, noted the following: "My only comment is that this program can have far-reaching consequences and should be pursued with intelligence, courage and a will to succeed". I pasted this handwritten comment inside the cover of my copy of *Nutrition for Health: An Agenda for Action* and it became my own personal mission statement.

The creation of the Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion is a nice example of "knowing what you want is very powerful". On a Monday in the spring of 2000, the Deputy Minister announced a major departmental reorganization at Health Canada. As he explained what would happen to the nutrition file, a group of five senior nutrition employees met the Assistant Deputy Minister on Thursday and proposed the creation of an office that would become a focal point for nutrition within Health Canada. We had worked hard on thinking about how nutrition could be strengthened and we collectively knew well what we wanted. Our purpose was clear and to the credit of the Departmental Executive Committee in 2000, they agreed. Work hard, think about what is needed – you never know when the opportunity will present. Opportunity is missed all the time, because we are not ready. Intellectually engage – be prepared.

### **Perspective: it's all in the way you look at an issue**

Nutrition labelling was both an interesting and challenging file in the late 1990s. The national plan of action had

identified that one of the key actions needed to reinforce healthy eating practices was "improve the usefulness of nutrition labelling, increase its availability and broaden public education on its use". There were many stakeholders who were unhappy that Health Canada proposed to take a serious look at nutrition labelling policy. Government is a machine with distinct processes. Groups who are unhappy with what exists or where government appears to be moving will often seek a meeting with the Deputy Minister to voice their concerns. Those who work on the issue in question

are then asked to prepare Briefing Notes which provide senior management with their perspective on the issue. Briefing notes take time and are generated each time there is a meeting with senior officials. This provided another "transformative moment". If the preparation of briefing notes was

going to be what I spent time doing, then I would use the opportunity to ensure that the Deputy Minister and everyone in between would know as much as I do about the importance of nutrition and where nutrition labelling policy fits within that context. While the contentious nature of the initiative generated a lot of work, it meant that we had unprecedented opportunity to make the case for the importance of nutrition to health. The importance of providing perspective was significant. Had it not been for the Agenda for Action, nutrition labelling as we know it might never have been. Had it not been for nutrition labelling, the Office of Nutrition Policy and Promotion might not have been.

Personal perspective on one's work is also critical. Whatever it takes, however you personally put your life together, having people who allow you to place things that you find important into a broader perspective is key.

### **Partnership – a fundamental prerequisite**

If we are to achieve the "integration of nutrition considerations into health, agriculture, education, social and economic policies and programs", then partnerships are a fundamental prerequisite.

When revision of *Canada's Food Guide* (5) was initiated, two givens were that it would be based on the best evidence available and that widespread consultation would be undertaken. Both of these principles were prerequisites to the goal of having Canada's Food Guide emerge from the process as a credible tool, but clearly more than that was needed to achieve this higher level goal.

The development of the Food Guide was seen as another step on a pathway to effect change. Deliberate dialogue and conversations to produce guidance on what food pattern is considered healthy generates debate but also discourse on the importance of nutrition for health. From the day the revision was initiated in March 2004 until the launch in February 2007, we knew that partners were needed inside the Department, across Departments, with dietitians and with other stakeholders. Working closely with all partners would enable us collectively to understand the issues affecting food choices.

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An advisory group was created that was second to none in its dedication and that by design included all sectors. Principles included: respect for divergent opinions; learning from others; ensuring that all perspectives were carefully weighed; not veering for a moment from making decisions in the best interest of Canadians' health and well-being; providing robust consultation opportunity for meaningful dialogue.

Who could have imagined the complexity of the process? A federal election put consultation on hold. There were lots of issues to be discussed – every food group had big issues and so did the other concepts that were being included. Unintended messages underscored the importance of consultation. Who could have imagined a front page headline, “Health Canada wants you to eat white bread”? There was communication gone wrong. Political questions emerged from the widespread interest in nutrition and guidance on how to eat. The Standing Committee on Health looked at how Canada's Food Guide was going to influence obesity. Others struggled to see the Food Guide as an important policy document, not a pamphlet. Partnerships brought essential perspective to these discussions.

### Passion

Caring deeply about nutritional health and well-being provides us with a capacity to be passionate about what needs to be done. Another transformative moment emerged through the development of the *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health* in 2004 (6).

In February 2004, at a meeting of the World Health Assembly Executive Committee, several countries led by the United States expressed concerns with the Global Strategy and argued that it should be reopened for consultation. Canada decided to respond positively to this round of consultation to ensure that World Health Organization (WHO) heard from supportive voices as well as from those opposed.

During this period, Canada-US relations were a significant part of the government of Canada agenda. The Assistant Deputy Minister decided to request a discussion of the Canadian strategy by the Departmental Executive Committee. The Director General, International Affairs Directorate is the lead for Canada's participation in WHO and led the subsequent discussion. It was a very interesting opportunity to hear a discussion of a different nature at a very senior level. But it also meant that it was important for this group to have a broad understanding of this initiative and why it mattered. The double burden of malnutrition and obesity in developing nations, profound global nutrition transition, and the need for serious global action were all important.

The intervention that was made was passionate. It needed to be. It was agreed that Canada would proceed as planned.

At the 57<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly in May 2004, endorsement of the Global Strategy hit another bump in the road. Later, word came in the form of a phone call from WHO to thank Canada for its leadership role in the ultimate endorsement of the Global Strategy by the World Health Assembly. When the delegation returned to Ottawa, we learned that when passage of the Global Strategy ran into trouble, the

head of the Canadian delegation volunteered to lead a drafting team that led to its final endorsement. The passionate discussion at the Departmental Executive Committee on its importance played a role in the decisions made by the Canadian delegation. It doesn't get better than this...a competent Assistant Deputy Minister and a competent Canadian delegation seeing that what was needed to be done was done. Take another look at the *Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health* (6). Think Canadian, be proud and work to implement it here.

### Power – Sphere of Influence

We all have a sphere of influence and we need to use it. Dietitians with one foot firmly planted in the care system, one foot planted in public health/community health are well placed to influence. Dietitians are found in every sector. Dietitians are everywhere they need to be. We have a job to do.

Canada needs policies and approaches that reflect the realities of people's lives today. We need to all get serious about supporting healthy eating and preventing the rising rates of obesity and chronic disease.

### CONCLUSION

These are complex issues that require comprehensive, coordinated and multi-sectoral responses, a willingness to take on fresh approaches, capacity, vision and leadership.

Canadians face unprecedented challenges. They need both individual and collective action from you. As you journey forward, my hope is that when you think about “What floats your boat”, you will think about the importance of five Ps: Purpose, Perspective, Partnership, Passion and Power – the power of your sphere of influence.

As our work evolves and changes, I urge you to remember Ernie, a Canadian who believes that your efforts to improve nutritional health and well-being “...can have far reaching consequences and should be pursued with intelligence, courage and a will to succeed.”

Whatever you do, wherever you are – pursue your work with intelligence, courage and a will to succeed.

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