

## LPI on Health - 2009 Diet and Optimum Health Conference

Dr. Marion Nestle, New York University

Public Lecture Speaker

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Introduction/Conclusion: Naomi Hirsch, Environmental Health Sciences Center, OSU

Host: Sandra Uesugi, Environmental Health Sciences Center, OSU

Guest: Dr. Marion Nestle, New York University

[THEME MUSIC]

HIRSCH: Welcome to LPI on Health, a podcast series to inform you about the recent micronutrient research and events coming out of the Linus Pauling Institute at Oregon State University. For more information, visit our website at <http://lpi.oregonstate.edu>.

[THEME MUSIC]

UESUGI: This is Sandra Uesugi with the Environmental Health Sciences Center at Oregon State University. If you find yourself confused by food labels, frustrated by the lack of healthier options, or feel your healthy intentions sabotaged by excessively large portions or an overabundance of cheap, processed foods, you are not alone. What can we do about this?

Dr. Marion Nestle of New York University has some suggestions. Her research focuses on how science and society influence dietary advice and practice and is the author of renown books such as *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, *What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating*, *Safe Food: Bacteria, Biotechnology, and Bioterrorism* and most recently, *Pet Food Politics: The Chihuahua in the Coal Mine*.

I spoke with Dr. Nestle before her public lecture at the 2009 Linus Pauling Institute Diet and Optimum Health Conference in Portland, Oregon and discussed food choices, food activism, and our responsibility as individuals versus our responsibility as a society.

NESTLE: Hi, I'm Marion Nestle, and I'm a Professor of Nutrition Food Studies and Public Health at New York University. I write a column Food Matters for the San Francisco Chronicle and I blog everyday, pretty much, at <http://foodpolitics.com> where I talk about issues related to agriculture, food, nutrition and health. Food system issues which are the kinds of things I'm working on these days.

UESUGI: Great. Tomorrow you're going to be talking about personal versus social responsibility. Can you talk about those differences?

NESTLE: Sure, my standard talk is some version of personal versus social responsibility because most people who advise the public about what to put it as a matter of completely personal responsibility. It's your job to make sure you eat healthfully, meet all your nutritional requirements, and do everything you're

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supposed to for your health without ever really taking into consideration how hard it is for so many people to do that.

And the best example that I can use is larger portions. There's now so much research that shows that larger portions not only have more calories, but they encourage people to eat more calories from those portions and to underestimate the number of calories they're eating even if they're educated about it, even if they've been trained to know that portion sizes are too large and have too many calories. They're still going to eat more calories out of it even if the food doesn't taste good.

And this kind of research which informs so much of my thinking about these issues suggests to me that the environment that we live in determines a great deal of how we eat, and what we eat and why we eat the way we do. And that if we're going to help people to eat more healthfully, we not only have to educate them about what healthful is, we have to create an environment that makes it easy for them to do that.

UESUGI: As an individual, how do we encourage policy makers, the industry, health care to help us create an environment where we can make those changes?

NESTLE: Well, my not-so-secret goal is to turn everybody into food activists. I want to see everybody advocating for a healthier food system not only for people themselves, but for farm animals, for farm workers, and the environment so that everything is tied to together. Agriculture is a big contributor to climate change. We have that to consider these days too.

And I just tell people to pick their issues. Pick the one that you really feel passionate about and get out there and join other people who are working on it and get busy. There's plenty to do.

UESUGI: In your book, you outline ways for people to... you basically take us on a tour through the grocery store and how to interpret labels and all the different choices that are there, because it is overwhelming. And I liked your example of how someone can, on a modest budget, incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables into their diet. With these current economic challenges that we have, do you have other suggestions how individuals and families can continue to make those choices?

NESTLE: Well, first of all, you have to know how to cook. And my first piece of advice is to teach people how to cook. Now that we have this economic downturn, people in supermarkets are telling me that lots of people are looking at these foods and coming up to people behind the counter and saying, "What do I do with this?" They haven't got a clue. And all of a sudden, the supermarkets are finding themselves in the position of cooking schools. They're having to set up cooking schools on their properties in order to help people figure out what to do with these things. Well, I think that's great if that's a result of the economic downturn. It maybe one benefit.

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But this is about policy also. Because there's a reason why fruits and vegetables appear to be so expensive to people who don't have much money and junk appears to be so much cheaper. You get more calories out of the junk food than you do out of fruits and vegetables. And when people are hungry, they want calories. That's policy and the policy has to do with the way we subsidize certain kinds of foods and not others. So here, again, it's a matter of not only teaching individuals how to cook and how to take care of themselves and their families, but also how to join other people in advocating for a food system that's going to make it easier for everybody to eat better.

That's why I think school food is so important, because it's not that kids eat all their foods in school, but schools set an example of, kind of, a standard of what appropriate is about. And if the schools aren't producing good food for the kids, and if their giving the kids junk food and making kids think that's what their supposed to be eating, then the schools aren't doing their job.

UESUGI: I've heard that school nutrition is going to be changing, and they're trying to incorporate more whole grains, lower fat, but in the forms that kids are used to eating. So corn dogs made with whole grains or lower fat. Does that teach kids healthy eating if they don't realize that's what it is?

NESTLE: Well, I think that goes under the heading of a particular philosophy that says that a better junk food is a good choice. I think we have to ask the question, "Is a junk food that has better nutrients and slightly less of the bad stuff in it, really a good choice?" I think not.

What you really want is you want kids eating unprocessed foods or minimally processed foods that are cooked well and taste good and have all different kinds of textures and flavors and teach them to expand their palates.

And in schools that have really serious attempts to try to get kids to eat better, it can be done, and it can be done quite cheaply. And you go into these schools and you watch the kids and they can distinguish between ten different kinds of Asian diets. They know the difference between the food consumed in north India and south India. Their palates are expanded. They say the most sophisticated things about the kinds of foods their eating. They think that miso soup is the best thing they've ever eaten even if it's got big chunks of spinach or seaweed floating in it, they're thrilled beyond belief. And these are just normal kids. They're just normal kids with adults around who think that feeding kids healthy food is important to do. And that's all the difference. That's all the difference.

UESUGI: So, one last question. Fast food restaurants are now carrying apple slices and other fresh foods that can be incorporated into a kid's meal. What are your feelings about the fact that they are available as choices now but they're in a fast food setting?

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NESTLE: Well, we now have calorie labeling in New York City where you can go into fast food restaurants in Manhattan and Brooklyn and Queens and Staten Island and the airports. And every single one of them will list the number of calories that are being given there.

And there are now lots of studies that are going on of calorie labeling and the effect that's having on consumers. And what we hear over and over again is that people don't go to fast food restaurants because they want to eat healthfully. They're in fast food restaurants because they don't care about what they're eating. And some of them, a few of them, a very small percentage will look at the calories, but they won't have any idea what they mean. Or if they do know what they mean, it doesn't have very much effect on the amount that they're eating.

So that's not the population that really needs to be... that's going to be affected by this. This is the population that needs to be reached by something, but I think it needs to be reached by fast food restaurants making their foods healthier. There's no reason why they can't do it.

The one thing that calorie labeling has done is that it's forced the restaurants to start looking at what they're doing and to start making changes in their formulations. The example that I give is that there's one place in New York that had a pomegranate-blueberry smoothie, which you would think would be the healthiest thing in the world. It had 1200 calories! Now you can't get one for that many calories anymore. It's down to 500. So that's a big change. Five hundred is still a quarter of an average woman's caloric intake. But at least it's not twice that much.

UESUGI: Do you see that food labeling policy moving towards or the calorie information moving outside of New York?

NESTLE: Well, Congress has just introduced bills to do national calorie labeling. The Restaurant Association prefers one that's much less explicit. And we'll have to see how this all plays out with the new government, but I'm very optimistic that the new government is going to be able to do some good things. Let's cheer them on!

UESUGI: Well, thank you, Marion!

NESTLE: My pleasure!

[THEME MUSIC]

HIRSCH: Thanks for tuning in. This podcast was produced in collaboration with the Environmental Health Sciences Center with funding from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences.

On behalf of everyone at the Linus Pauling Institute, we wish you optimum health. Have an awesome day!

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