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How Lifestyle Effects Nutrition in China

"Our lives are to be used and thus to be lived as fully as possible, and truly it seems that we are never so alive as when we concern ourselves with other people." Indeed, Harry Chapin was right. And there is no one group that needs that concern more than those people who are suffering. Whether that suffering be of malnutrition from a lack of the foods they need or obesity from eating too much of what they don't need, those people need our help and our concern.

The levels of obesity in the world are rising, even in developing countries where there are people starving. It seems like the reason is changes in the way people live, what they eat, and how they get their exercise. As people move toward the cities for more opportunities than they can find in rural areas, their lifestyles change. People get less physical exertion in the cities and, as they work away from the home, people may be unable to cook food for their families like they would be able to in rural areas. Buying from the increasing numbers of fast food restaurants is cheaper and easier, but it does little for a person's health.

In rural areas, the problem is different. An article from FAO.org says, "In 2003, China fed 1.26 billion people (20 percent of the world's population) on seven percent of the world's arable land. At the national level, agricultural production has consistently outpaced population growth since the early 1960s." For many years China had a hard time keeping up with a very fast growing population. It wasn't until the 1990s that the country was able to keep up (to a point) with its population demands. The available food rose greatly from 1960 to 1995, a little less than a 900kcal increase.

According to the United Nations Food Program, the ability of China to feed its population, however, hides the fact that many people live in rural and remote areas are not getting the nutrition from the food they eat. Most of the poorer peoples in China live in areas that lack many resources. Often times, a family will consume more food in a year than they produce because the soil lacks the nutrients to sustain the crops that would keep that family self-sufficient. As a consequence, the poorest households are also the ones with the most nutrition deficiency, health care problems. They must depend on others and the government to get what they need to survive.

Rural China is predominately made up of farmers who grow enough food to feed themselves and their families, little more. Soil erosion and pollution have lowered the production, putting a strain on the people who have to live off the land. People in rural China are having a hard time finding the right kinds of food that will keep their families nourished and healthy. Many people in the rural areas suffer from vitamin and mineral deficiencies. People are unaware of the certain foods that could keep them healthy and give them long and productive lives because of the lack of proper education concerning nutrition. Wang Longde, China's Vice-Minister of Health in 2004, was reported to have said that he has witnessed rural mothers sell eggs in markets in order to buy their children sugar and chocolate.

As stated before, China has the ability to feed all of its people, but that does not mean that they are getting the right kinds of food, or that everybody is getting that food. This is especially true in the rural areas where people do not grow the food they need to survive because they don't know what is necessary. As evidenced by the previous anecdote, people seem unaware that

vegetables are better for them than other foods and so, unintentionally, they may create health problems for themselves and their families.

One of the more serious problems that effects the malnourished, rural Chinese community is iron deficiency anemia, or IDA. This is a serious problem among women of childbearing age. It affects about 41 percent of that population in rural areas. It leads to increased maternal mortality and causes fatigue and reduced productivity. In the 27 percent of rural children it affects, IDA affects social development, reduces school performance, and increases morbidity.

Vitamin A and D deficiency are also prevalent in adults and children alike. Vitamin A deficiency leads to a higher child mortality rate and also leads to a raised chance of blindness. This is a rural problem with 26 percent prevalence in these areas. In contrast, the urban areas only have a prevalence percentage of 3.8. Vitamin D deficiency also has serious problems associated with it such as increased rate of rickets, osteoporosis, increased cancer rates, and autoimmune diseases.

As a testament to the possibilities that could lead to eradicating malnutrition, however, iodine deficiency levels are on the downturn. In a move that proves that malnutrition is something that can be dealt with and dealt with efficiently, the Chinese government and its Department of Health moved toward making sure that 90 percent of the population has sufficient iodine levels by reaching this population with iodized salt. The move protected some 133 million infants from iodine deficiency related brain damage over the past ten years.

But nutrition is not the only problem. In some areas, they are unable to grow what they need. Though the poor may own their own land, much of this land is of a low quality and unusable. This leads to the fact that they must then find some other way to get the food they eat. High unemployment adds to the difficulty of getting the types of food and nutrition that could keep the people healthy. It is estimated that the overall unemployment rate in rural areas is 20 percent. Life is hard for the people in these areas that tend to be the poorest that China has to offer. Many people turn to part-time jobs in larger towns, which leads to all sorts of other problems.

Despite the fact that China has a surplus of food production, the people in rural areas don't have the means that it takes to buy that food. They are unable to sell what they have for more food, because they need to eat what they have. It's a living day-to-day situation; one that leaves nothing for these people to fall back on when something goes wrong. There is little hope for a better future because they cannot save for a better future; they don't have the means.

On the other end of the spectrum from the people who aren't getting enough of what they need are the people who are getting too much of what they want. China's sudden position as a merging industrial power has led to wealth for many of its families. Cars, computers, and TVs have become staples in middle class and upper class families. Peoples' lives revolve around these things like never before, pausing their lives for hours at a time, hours in which a person gets little to no activity. Western customs and western foods (e.g. fast food) are being introduced for the first time and not always with the best results.

In urban China, the total population is 338 million, making it a very populated place indeed. As of 2002, 13.5 percent of the total Chinese population was of a middle class and that number is expected to double by 2010 with about 100 million families being called middle class. A typical person in this working class is a well-educated professional, what the United States

would call 'white-collar' employees. These are the people that run the offices and hold other such positions. They hold the cubical jobs and the managerial positions.

Because of the development of China's economy, the average person in a professional position in the city is making a great deal more than their grandparents did, or even than their parents did. The average household now makes between 75,000 and 100,000 yuan, about \$9,000 and \$12,000 US dollars. This is quite a bit more than previous generations of Chinese people and it is expected to jump again in the coming years. By 2010, average annual income is expected to be 150,000 yuan and the assets a person owns is expected to increase to 620,000 yuan.

Traditionally, being obese was a sign of wealth, but no longer. Now it is a sign of a middle class that eats too well and doesn't exercise. Because of the increase in China's economic status, too many people are eating western style foods, such as McDonald's. In the past, there hadn't been money for food. Now there is too much money for the wrong sorts of food. People in the middle class are no longer eating the small, but very healthy, portions of food their parents did. Today's generation doesn't have to ration their food. As illustrated by the obesity problems in the United States, where sizes of portions at fast food restaurants have grown significantly over the years, the portions of food in China have also grown bigger.

Official statistics state that obesity in children in China has hit ten percent, higher in certain parts of the country and, as stated, in the middle class. There has been a great increase in children, as well as adults, with weight problems as China moves forward with its economic development. So, there is a group of people who are eating more and exercising less. Along with this, come the health problems that used to be unheard of in China. Instead of the diseases that are typically attributed to malnutrition, there has been an increase in diseases that are connected to eating too much and eating too much of the wrong sorts of food.

A few of the factors that have affected this change have already been mentioned. For instance, China has quickly moved closer to being a developed country and the fact that the average middle class person is making more than they used to, enough to buy things for their children that had been unthinkable before. But, in addition to these economic changes, there have been social changes as well.

In 1979, China implemented its "One Child Policy" in an effort to slow and control its rapidly growing population. Along with other problems, this is one of the factors that has led to obesity in children and then, as they grow up, in adults. Because many children are the only children in their household, they tend to be doted on. The problem is, however, that this often means that they are given more attention, more food, and more gifts for the simple reason that their parents have no other child with whom they need to split that attention.

The Epoch Times says, "Obesity makes children reluctant to move or do activities; they sweat easily and are susceptible to anxiety and shortness of breath. It weakens their immune systems and makes respiratory diseases more common. Some children have diseases like hypertension and hyperlipidemia along with obesity. Many obese children are lacking in trace elements such as iron and calcium. Bad living habits (eating more and exercising less) are said to be the primary causes for obesity. Heredity factors account for about 16 percent of the total number of obese people, and obesity caused by endocrine disorders accounts for a very small percentage."

It's a vicious cycle, a child becomes overweight because they eat too much, this makes them unwilling to exercise because it is uncomfortable, which leads to more weight gain when they eat and then do not run and play to burn it off.

In adults, it is much the same, though they have the added stress of jobs with which to contend. It is the same around the world where obesity is also a problem. A worker will come home tired from a day of work and will want to just sit down, watch some TV and eat supper. No one wants to have to worry about going out and exercising, not if they don't have to. For many people, staying fit isn't a priority because they do not think it affects their performance at their jobs; which is really what matters, anyway.

While a contrasting issue, it is hard to decide who has the more difficult situation. Is it the lower class living in impoverished areas, unable to grow the kinds and amounts of food they need? Or is it the middle and upper classes in the city, that have turned to a different diet than previous generations, causing a great increase in obesity and weight as well as other health problems that go with it?

On the topic of obesity, it is impossible to talk outside of terms such as prevention and long-term. There is no way to change the now. Instead, one must focus on increased education in order to prevent obesity and an increase in emphasis on exercise and eating correctly. China is doing just that. When the government realized that the obesity problem was gaining momentum fast, emphasis was immediately put on losing weight and staying healthy. Middle and upper class families now are paying hundreds of US dollars in order to help their children take off the weight. In an effort to control their weight and health, children are sent off to programs sponsored by hospitals. In a world where there is a McDonald's on every street corner, these children eat only the healthiest of foods and exercise often. It is hard work and expensive, but the rewards are often just what they wanted.

One way that the Chinese government is trying deal with the issues of malnutrition, be it the lack of proper nutrients or obesity, is to address the lack of nutritionists in the country. As of 2004, only the large hospitals employed professional nutritionists. In the future, China hopes that every company and facility dealing with food will have their own nutritionist on staff. Perhaps it is this lack of the professional people whose job it is to know food that has caused there to be a lack of knowledge about food in general, and especially in the rural areas. Many people in rural areas suffer from Vitamin A deficiency, a problem that can be cured very easily with more carrots in a person's diet. The problem is that people in these areas are unaware of this. It is this lack of knowledge about what is nutritionally good for a person that China is trying to solve by encouraging corporations and smaller hospitals to add nutritionists to their staff. A lack of education is the root of many China's nutritionally related health problems. So, more education would be a solution to long-term goals.

However, the short term must also be addressed. Organizations such as the UNICEF have started sending in vitamin supplements to the children and other people who need them. While this does not take care of what happens to these people in the future, it does answer the question of what is going to be done *now* and it is a noble pursuit itself.

After studying all the facts and learning which solutions work, my advice, I believe, is simple: Education. Educate the people who grow their food, show them how they can get the best out of their land, and teach them that some things have to be eaten, while others should be avoided. People don't instinctively know how to take care of themselves. They must be taught

which things will keep them healthy and what things will cause them to have health problems and, possibly, an early death.

As for those who are overfeeding their children, provide them with the information such as the fact that too much of something does exist. We need to make sure that they understand the difference between food that encourages good health and fights away diseases and food that wears one down and encourages health problems over time. It could be as simple as knowing the difference between carrots that can prevent blindness and sugar that can lead to obesity, a rather simple concept, but a very important one, nonetheless.

Emphasis should also be placed on physical health. One doesn't need fancy hospital programs in order to stay healthy; all that a child needs to do is walk to the park with his or her friends every day after school and spend a few hours running around and playing, as children should. The knowledge that a simple way to fight health problems, as well as prevent them from starting up in the first place, is exercise should be available to all. Every woman, man, and child needs to know how much he or she must walk, run, and exercise in a day in order to stay as healthy as possible.

For the problems that must be taken care of *right now*, a page should be taken from China's and the UNICEF's books. The programs that they have implemented have worked and have saved lives. Supplements should be given to those most at risk for vitamin deficiencies, woman of childbearing age and children. Both China's Health Department and the UNICEF report that it only costs only a few US cents per person, per year to get these people the things they need to stay healthy and yet the reward is great.

All these solutions seem simple and the rewards that go with them are so great that it seems that we must try to fix the problems. It would only cost a few dollars for the nutrition to save the hungry. It will also take the government's encouragement to get the middle and upper classes to exercise and refocus their dietary choices. Carrying on with the work already started is important and without that, little will be accomplished.

A little girl once said, "How wonderful is it that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." She was right, it is wonderful. Improvement can be easy, the key is to start and keep going. The potential rewards are wonderful for everyone involved.

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