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Eating right to stay healthy

WHAT has been keeping you busy lately?

Nutrition and health care have been keeping me on my toes besides my full-time profession. I did not have any interest in food (therapy) until 1996 when my father-in-law was diagnosed with cancer. Today I talk at public forums on food and health care.

What do you do full time?

I am an environmental sociologist by profession. I conduct studies on the impact of forest development on local activities and how it can help local communities and also how traditional knowledge helps indigenous people. I also do forest auditing.

How did you get involved with food and health care?

My father-in-law was diagnosed with prostate cancer and was given three years to live. He was active and involved in many social activities and my wife and I wondered how he could have cancer.

Looking back, we realised he had been enjoying "rich" foods (ie high in cholesterol and calories) since his 20s and it was killing him slowly. There is evidence that food consumption has very strong linkage

ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIOLOGIST DR LIM HIN FUI WALKS HIS TALK ON HEALTHY LIVING. HE TELLS **KAREN ARUKESAMY** HOW HIS FAMILY EATS WELL AND LIVES WELL WITH RARE VISITS TO THE DOCTOR.

with cancer, apart from smoking and alcohol. Despite being sad for my father-in-law, we did not give up; we sought ways to help him.

The doctor advised immediate surgery to remove the hard portion of the prostate but we had heard from cancer patients, how they suffered physically and mentally after the surgery and medical treatment. After the surgery, the tumour was removed but it did not mean he had fully recovered.

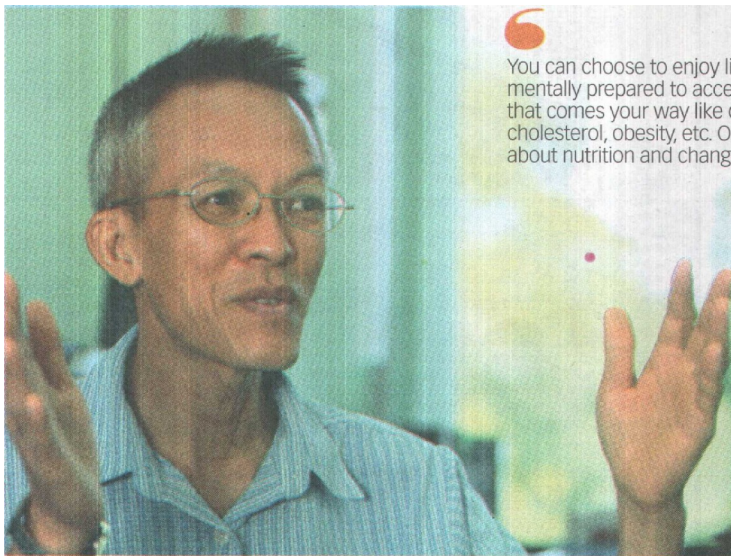
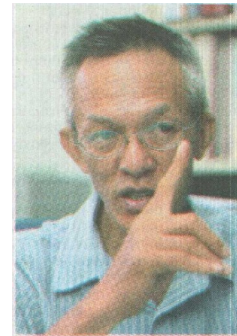
We spoke to friends about cancer treatments and a colleague showed me a booklet on cancer and its treatment (*Cancer is not deadly: Public talk in Malaysia* by Dr Lai Chui-Nan).

The booklet did not talk about conventional treatment and surgery.

That caught my attention because we had not heard of cancer patients going through non-conventional treatment and surviving.

After reading the book, I began gathering more information on food and how it could cause diseases and I found that the accumulation of toxins in the body can cause diseases and the inability to detoxify may result in diseases.

Not all cancer specialists advise their patients to take the natural approach. They always encourage the conventional treatment.



Dr Lim:
Swears by
macrobiotic
diet

You can choose to enjoy life and be mentally prepared to accept whatever that comes your way like diabetes, high cholesterol, obesity, etc. Or you can learn about nutrition and change your diet.

We met a lot of cancer patients to understand the disease. When my father-in-law switched to a vegetarian diet, my mother-in-law, my wife and I decided to adopt the same diet to provide moral support for my father-in-law. It wasn't easy but we managed it. Physical fitness is essential for cancer patients. Not many talk about it, so I thought the public should know and I wrote a book, *Eating for Good Health*, which has received good support and is in its second edition. My father-in-law surpassed the doctor's projected three years and lived an extra 10 years before he passed away in January. Most cancer patients go through much pain in their final stages but he died peacefully without any pain.

Tell us more about this diet?

We read about the macrobiotic diet approach popularised by Michio Kushi (1993), which advocates the use of traditional food such as whole grains, beans, soyfoods and locally-grown vegetables as primary sources of food energy and nutrition. It also

includes mineral-rich foods, sea salt and natural sweeteners like rice syrup and barley malt to replace refined salt and sugar and miso to replace monosodium glutamate (MSG).

The approach sounded interesting but we did not know much about the macrobiotic diet and our concern was to consume more vegetables and reduce meat. The diet we adopted was more vegetarian than macrobiotic.

I remember the first vegetarian lunch – three dishes of vegetables with brown rice – we had. It was tasteless, with no oil or salt. Being a meat lover, my father-in-law complained it was for cows and not humans. But we were firm in our decision to change and so was he. By early 1997, the vegetarian diet began to show encouraging results. After about 10 months of being diagnosed, my father-in-law went for his fourth blood test and his prostate-specific antigen (PSA) dropped to 5.5ng/l (microgram per litre) from 615.8ng/l when he was first diagnosed. It meant that his PSA had returned to normal and the cancer cells were under control. The doctor was surprised by the declining PSA and reversion of cancer cells to normal cells without medicine.

There is a saying "You are what you eat". How true is this?

It is relevant for all those who want to be healthy and it is very important for those who are fighting with sickness.

How do we stay healthy and still eat the food we love?

Change of mindset is vital. You can choose to enjoy life and be mentally prepared to accept whatever that comes your way like diabetes, high cholesterol, obesity, etc. Or you can learn about nutrition and change your diet but that doesn't mean you cannot eat your favourite dishes. But ensure that your regular food intake is healthy.

Once you are above 40 or 50, you should consider giving up gradually "rich" food.

How can food help prevent diseases like cancer?

The word cancer is a term many do not want to hear. Simply, cancer patients normally do not live long and in some cases, patients die within months as cancer cells can spread to vari-

ous parts of the body in a short time. Others survive for a few years. The question is whether one has to die earlier because of cancer. No. There is a Chinese saying "Sickness comes through the mouth". Food consumption has a strong linkage with cancer, apart from smoking and alcohol. Studies say we should only consume 20% acidic food and 80% alkaline food. I would propose that everyone follow this formula. You need to understand what they are. Reduce meat consumption because all meat is acidic and dairy products and eggs as well. Eat more vegetables, fruits and grains.

What is healthy living?

My family and I believe that an important path to good health is via healthy eating habits. We also believe consuming vegetarian or organic food and fasting are some ways for healthy living because we can see the difference in our lives. We are healthy and have not taken medicine since 2004. My eight-year-old son has to date only gone to a clinic once; when he was one-year-old.

A healthy body makes a healthy mind because it helps prevent physical and mental stress.

You have to respect life. If you are a cancer patient and you want to live longer, you have to respect life without your favourite foods. In fact, it is not for cancer alone but for all diseases.

People should remember that changes take place gradually and it is very important to start now. Don't wait till it's too late because change doesn't take place overnight. Change your menu to suit your pace and food preference.

Research has shown that over 60% of those above 40 have at least one chronic medical problem that requires treatment and by 60, at least 60% are on regular medication. It is not about long life; it is about healthy life.

But organic food is not cheap. What do you reckon

the government should do?

I think the government should help organic farmers through the organic farming scheme under the Agriculture and Agro based Industry Ministry. Then people will feel more encouraged to consume organic food. It will also encourage more organic farming. Mass production will bring prices down.

Does detoxification help?

Yes, it does. Toxic substances are everywhere - in the food, water and air. Our body and bacteria in the intestines also produce toxins. Alkaline food helps to detoxify the body. Fasting facilitates detoxification to achieve physical and mental health. Occasional fasting is effective in staying healthy and reducing weight.

In the late 1970s, I used to have anus itchiness and for over 20 years I took medicine for it. After I changed my diet, the itchiness disappeared within three months. It was amazing.

Is conventional medicine necessary if food can prevent diseases?

I am not saying it is unnecessary but you can avoid it whenever possible. Medical expenses are always a burden and the bills are escalating. Due to financial difficulties, some do not even go to the clinic for a check up. They instead rely on pain killers, self-medication or home remedies.

People hardly think about changing their diet to prevent sickness and stay fit. The government and many health-care organisations have been promoting healthy lifestyle but how many take heed. Investing in health food to prevent diseases or sickness is worthwhile. We should regard health as No.1 on the scale of importance. It is natural to think money is more important as it meets our material needs but with age, we gradually realise that money is not everything. While money can pay for medical treatment and services, it does not guarantee good health. In any case, we should give ourselves a chance to test the power of natural diet.



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Dr Lim: Occasional fasting is helpful