



LET FOOD BE THY MEDICINE

WELCOA WHITEPAPER BY KAITLYN PAULY, MS, RD, LMNT

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ABOUT **KAITLYN PAULY, MS, RD, LMNT**



As Product/Marketing Coordinator for the Wellness Council of America, Kaitlyn brings a clinical perspective to the field of corporate wellness. Kaitlyn has a BA in journalism-advertising and a Masters in Nutritional Sciences through South Dakota State University. She is a Registered Dietitian with the CDR through the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Prior to WELCOA she worked as a weight management dietitian specializing in bariatrics, pre-op nutrition education and intensive behavioral therapy. She also has experience as an adjunct professor of nutrition sciences through Presentation College. As a graduate student, Kaitlyn's research focused primarily on how to tailor web-based healthy lifestyle interventions for minority populations. She also developed and implemented school lunch menus that complied with the latest National School Lunch Program Guidelines for her local school district. As a former collegiate swimmer, Kaitlyn has always understood the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle for achieving optimal performance and overall wellbeing in life. Her passion is to help others achieve their best selves by sharing evidenced-based information in a way that empowers them to make changes in their lives.

**The information in this paper is an objective summary of current research surrounding nutrition and heart disease (among other conditions). It is not meant to be taken as medical advice.*

LET FOOD BE THY MEDICINE

★ Imagine sitting in your doctor's office with a medical rap sheet that includes Type II Diabetes, erectile dysfunction, 7 cardiac stents, 4 angioplasties and a double coronary artery bypass graft. You are 49 years old and your doctor breaks the news that there is nothing more that can be done for your aggressive heart disease. Hopeless and exhausted by endless trips to the hospital, you decide to try one more thing that you read about in a research journal years ago. You sign up for a 5.5 hour intensive counseling session at the Cleveland Clinic Wellness Institute led by Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, where you learn how to start and follow a whole foods plant-based diet. Four months after starting to eat this way, you no longer have diabetes, chest pain or erectile dysfunction. You return to a normal life empowered with the knowledge that by changing your diet, you were able to reverse your aggressive heart disease more profoundly than any medical treatment or doctor ever could. You are just one of many who have experienced the power of a plant-based diet to prevent and reverse heart disease. But why was it the last treatment you discovered? Why did cutting you open, grafting your arteries, ballooning /stenting and taking multiple pills per day come as a first choice of treatment instead of as a last resort? Blame a backwards healthcare system, a lack of awareness, pharmaceutical influence or your limited insurance coverage... either way it seems wrong that changing your diet came as a final solution instead of a first treatment option.

Ken Beckman, an actuary with over 20 years of experience in the insurance industry has been challenging the status quo lately. In his paper, *Challenge to the Insurance Industry: A Solution to Significantly Reduce Health Care Costs*, he asks insurance companies to take some responsibility to help lower the cost of medical coverage and dramatically improve the health and wellbeing of America.¹ Currently healthcare costs in America total 2.5 trillion or 18% of GDP, and heart disease tops the list for the most common and costly condition.² Beckman believes that there is significant evidence to support plant-based diets as a treatment for heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure and many other chronic conditions. This is a belief that is predicated by personal experience and by watching thousands of patients resolve chronic health conditions by using plant based diets. Considering the evidence, he believes that nutritional counseling for following plant-based diets should at least make the list of covered medical benefits. Provocative? Yes. Affordable, realistic, sustainable and effective? Absolutely.

Whole food plant-based diets include foods made from plants with minimal amount of processing such as whole grains, beans, legumes, tubers, fruits and vegetables. The "diet" even without a calorie limit or a complicated plan, has helped millions of people around the world eliminate symptoms, stop the progression, and in many cases, reverse numerous chronic and other conditions. As if the overwhelming scientific evidence to support the power of plant-based diets to reverse disease is not enough, there are countless testimonials from people who, not long ago, were staring death in the face and are now literally running marathons. This scientific evidence and the accompanying [testimonials](#) from people including the likes of famous actor Samuel L. Jackson and the former President Bill Clinton are enough to get even the healthiest individuals to toy with the idea of implementing a plant-based diet. Look no further than WELCOA's own CEO and President Ryan Picarella, who ..after attending Dr. Esselstyn's 5.5 hour seminar, chose to follow a whole food plant-based diet for 30 days. Without yet knowing the internal

benefits, he had this to say, “The research is conclusive that a plant-based diet has the ability to reduce risk and reverse heart disease in most people with little to no side effects. My experience at the Cleveland Clinic and then after following a plant-based diet for 30-days has changed my eating habits for life. Now I eat about 75% plant-based; not only do I have more energy, I feel better overall.”

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- RYAN PICARELLA, WELCOA

Currently, there is widespread belief that once someone has a chronic condition such as heart disease or type 2 diabetes, there is very little that can be done to actually reverse the disease and the best outcome possible is to maintain the condition to prevent it from worsening.

“The fact that a whole food plant-based approach provides a safe, effective, low-cost alternative to eliminate symptoms and potentially reverse the underlying condition without drugs or surgery is unknown to a vast majority of Americans. It simply requires that physicians accept the concept, provide it as an option to patients and support patients who are willing to make changes.”

- KEN BECKMAN

Physicians who currently use plant-based diets as primary treatment in their practices include Dr. Dean Ornish, Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn and Dr. John McDougall, among others. Each of these physicians have developed lifestyle modification programs that have demonstrated significantly greater impacts on the health of patients who follow them compared to conventional treatment options. For example, of patients enrolled in the Ornish “lifestyle medicine” program, which incorporates stress management and physical activity with plant-based eating, 99% have either stopped the progression or reversed existing heart disease after 5 years, saving approximately \$30,000 per patient in a three year period.³ Of patients who participated in Dr. Esselstyn’s program, which doesn’t include physical activity or stress management, 94% saw improvement in symptoms and 22% demonstrated reversal of existing heart conditions.⁴ Dr. McDougall has had similar results with his plant-based diet treatment including the reversal or dramatic improvement of many conditions such as diabetes, obesity, rheumatoid arthritis and cancer.⁵

The advantage of plant-based diets is that they can be implemented effectively using a one-on-one approach; they also do not require large capital investment, sophisticated technology or lengthy training. Although going plant-based can certainly be a drastic and permanent lifestyle change for many, it seems less extreme when compared to the “1.2 million coronary stents being done per year, 500,000 bypass operations where your entire chest is divided in half, veins are taken off your leg and put in your heart... the \$25 billion (spent) on statin drugs, \$5 billion spent on stents and the epidemics of obesity, diabetes and heart disease.” - Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn.

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- DR. CALDWELL ESSELSTYN

Despite the common belief that a whole food plant-based diet is too extreme for most patients, the programs previously described have found that they are more easily accepted than commonly believed, likely due to the quick improvement in personal health that patients experience. Due to the reception, care providers can be confident when prescribing the diet, however must be careful when presenting it to patients. In his paper, Beckman cautions against the use of vague language when giving nutrition advice, especially in an environment of confusion caused by seemingly contradictory studies that are widely publicized in the mainstream media. He believes the vagueness is a major downfall of current dietary recommendations, which don't seem to motivate patients to change. The key, he believes is to use real life examples and explain in simple terms how lifestyle changes can achieve such remarkable results. These stories serve as powerful messages to patients, many of whom have been told that they must be on multiple medications for the rest of their lives.

While there will always be those who just want to take a handful of pills rather than make lifestyle changes experts advise:


“(We) should not be ignoring ideas just because we perceive that the public does not want to hear them. Consumers have the ultimate choice of whether to integrate our findings into their lifestyles, but we owe it to them to give them the best information possible with which to make the decision and not decide for them.”⁶

- COLIN CAMPBELL

The biggest barrier, according to Dr. Ornish, “has been the lack of widespread insurance coverage” without which, “no matter how good a program is clinically, if it's not reimbursable, it's not sustainable.”^{7,8} However, some insurance companies are not turning a blind eye to the idea of using a plant-based diet approach as a treatment option for various diseases. In 2013, Kaiser Permanente advised “[p]hysicians should consider recommending a plant-based diet to all their patients, especially those with high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease or obesity.”⁹ They have also created user friendly guides for both patients and physicians ([available online](#)) explaining the benefits and practical aspects of implementing a plant based diet. The belief of Beckman is that, even if only a minority of patients followed a plant-based diet there would be a significant reduction in healthcare costs.¹

In his paper, Beckman outlines two key principles for any large-scale implementation of a plant-based diet to treat chronic conditions 1) incentives that work with existing provider payment structures and 2) opportunities for additional income for physicians, without requiring capital expenditures on their part. A model for this might include insurance companies providing education about the benefits of a whole-foods plant based diet directly to members prompting them to “ask your doctor if a plant-based diet is right for

you.” Physicians would receive a per capita fee from the insurer for each patient “prescribed” a plant-based treatment as well as be eligible for additional compensation for achieving certain health outcomes among these patients. The “prescription” would be filled when a patient attends an educational seminar on plant-based diets that provides clear, practical and motivating approaches that are highly effective. While seminars would be the financial responsibility of the insurer, they could be developed more quickly and cost effectively by independent third-parties serving all insurers. To encourage effective seminars, insurers could also compensate seminar providers using incentives based on patient outcomes.¹

After many sincere efforts from insurers healthcare costs continue to rise and chronic disease is more prevalent than ever. It is time to take a look at a solution that insurance companies can help implement that realistically has the potential to solve the intractable problem. The evidence is overwhelming that a whole food plant-based diet provides an opportunity to not only reduce the growth in spending, but actually decrease total health care costs more than any drug, medical procedure, insurance reform or provider payment model can hope to. Implementation of this model has minimal risks, if any, and delaying its offering would be a disservice to all insured individuals. Even if traditional education and training may suggest a more complex intervention, why not try a simpler, more useful and effective approach? 

INTERESTED IN LEARNING HOW TO IMPLEMENT A PLANT-BASED DIET?

Stay tuned to WELCOA’s Well-Informed to hear how one organization is using plant-based diets to manage disease.

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