

'Do it for the planet' message may improve eating habits

Nutritionist Dr Rosemary Stanton suggests the key to reducing rising obesity levels may be to get people to eat healthy because it's good for the planet.

Dr Stanton told the Agencies for Nutrition Action national conference in Auckland that while there's general agreement about the need for changes in diet, education isn't working because the powerful food and beverage industries continue to convince people to buy their products.

"We need to stop thinking of ourselves as 'consumers' – passive creatures who use up resources and do the bidding of marketers, and think of ourselves as 'citizens' – responsible participants who think of the future and the collective good."

She says junk foods have a big carbon footprint and a major environmental impact, as does the huge amount of wasted fresh food.

"People waste lots of fresh food because they don't have the time or the skills to cook it. They also waste lots of healthy foods that need refrigeration, such as yoghurt, because they eat packaged junk food instead and the yoghurt is thrown out."

She says the message of 'buy less to avoid waste and save money' is a much-needed approach to healthy eating and may be a better motivator for people than being told not to do or eat something because it's bad for their health, or because it'll make them put on weight or because the doctor said so.

"Rather than stressing weight loss or consuming less fat, sugar or salt, let's promote foods that are good for the health of the planet because that dovetails with what's recommended for good health."

Dr Stanton says in the 1960s, before supermarkets, only 600-800 foods were available, many only when in season. "Now supermarkets offer 30,000 food products, including 1800 snack foods.

"We've changed our eating habits because it's been profitable for the food and beverage manufacturing industries to encourage us to change them. We've given over control to them and ignored the real issue, which is that we eat too much."

She says healthy eating messages, while scientifically correct, are confusing people and have encouraged the food industry to further increase the number of foods available.

"When nutritionists wanted people to eat less saturated fat, we meant cut the fat off your meat, use low-fat dairy products and don't fry everything. But what we got was thousands of new low fat foods where the fat had been replaced by sugar and various starches but the kilojoules were still there.

"We're telling people 'look for snack foods that have less than X milligrams of something bad or more than X milligrams of something good', when what we really should be saying is 'stop snacking'."

Dr Stanton says this approach needs to be backed up by governments applying appropriate taxes to junk food that reflect the true cost of the product, including its carbon footprint.

"Education is always important, but what made the most difference in getting people to stop smoking was regulation and making it socially unacceptable.

"A so called 'fat tax' on junk food annoys people, but a tax on a food because it wastes resources that are needed for our children and grandchildren may get a different response."

To download a transcript of Rosemary's presentation or other conference presentations, visit the ANA conference webpage: www.ana.org.nz/conference11/



Dr Rosemary Stanton

Dr Rosemary Stanton is Australia's best known nutritionist. Her work over the last 45 years has involved public health nutrition, education and consumer issues relating to nutrition.

As well as many scientific papers, Rosemary has authored over 30 books on food and nutrition, and is widely regarded as a spokesperson who is not beholden to any one interest group. Her major aim is to help people adapt to healthier diets, with more enjoyable foods which create minimal environmental damage.

In 1998 she was awarded an Order of Australia Medal for her services to community health through education in nutrition and dietetics.