

Let food be your medicine

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By Punya Srivatsava

Punya Srivastava meets Dr John McDougall, the internationally renowned advocate of the plant-based diet, whose prescription for good health is vegan oil-free food.

For a renowned physician and nutritionist who has popularized the validity of plant-based diets the world over, Dr John A McDougall, MD, is an unassuming man of 67 with steel grey hair, a fit and lean physique, a crinkly smile, and a sense of humor. Dr McDougall has written a number of books on plant-based diets and is certified as an internist by the Board of Internal Medicine and the National Board of Medical Examiners in the US.

He was recently in India for a series of talks on ‘Reversing Disease through Nutrition’, hosted in Mumbai and Delhi by SHARAN, a non-profit organisation with the goal of spreading awareness about holistic health, and an ecologically sustainable compassionate lifestyle. Dr McDougall has helped scores of people across the world reverse degenerative diseases by simply leading them to a low-fat, whole foods, plant-based, vegan diet. With 30 years of research and successful results backing him, he has stopped a number of people from going through what he calls deliberate ‘food poisoning’. This, he does through his internationally renowned McDougall Programme – a 10-day residential programme that he and his wife, Mary McDougall, host at a luxury resort in Santa Rosa, California. Medical miracles have been known to occur through diet and lifestyle changes during the workshops.

Excerpts from an interview with him:

Coming from mainstream medicine, what made you find faith in the alternative way of healing?

I graduated from the Michigan State University’s College of Human Medicine, and was placed as an intern in the Queen’s Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. I did my medical residency from the University of Hawaii, and it was during these

times, from 1971-1976, that the turnaround happened. My medical practice was not helping my patients at all, and the observations I made then brought about the shift. My observations contradicted two basic beliefs I had held since childhood. The first was that as we age, we naturally become fatter and sicker. The second was that a well-balanced diet was the best. It has been 40 years since I started the non-orthodox healing practice.

What was the turning point? And how has it impacted your life?

I was a very sick young man. I was 70 pounds heavier than I am now; suffered a major stroke at 18 which rendered my left side paralyzed for two weeks. I also underwent the trauma of surgery at the age of 24. I was chronically sick and overweight. It was during this time, from 1973-1976, that I was placed as a plantation doctor at a sugar plantation in the big island of Hawaii, and was taking care of 5,000 first to fourth generation Filipino, Japanese, Chinese and Korean people. None of my patients seemed to get any better from their chronic diseases despite my medicinal skills, surgeries and patience. The turnaround came when I observed their diet, and saw that the first, second and third generations to some extent ate differently from what the fourth generation people ate. The first generation people ate food that they had in their native lands, like rice and vegetables. But with each generation, the food started getting richer, until the fourth generation was having nothing but the ever popular Western 'junk' diet. I could see a change in their health; from being trim without chronic diseases, they put on weight and developed diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancers of the breast, colon and prostate. When I made these observations on the plantation, I personally changed my diet. This was between 1976 and 1978. I resolved my health problem, but it was a gradual change.

How did the McDougall Program come into existence? How did your family react to it?

After the time spent in the plantation, I surmised that diseases could be cured with a healthy diet. However, it was during my research days in the Hawaii Medical Library that the full potential of diet therapy unfolded before me. That is when I began to think about healing through food which gradually formed the health programs. When the shift happened, my wife was very supportive, and my children were very young. I raised my family on a diet based on starch, fruits and vegetables. Essentially for the last 38 years, I have not consumed dairy, meat,

poultry, fish, or any other animal product to any significant quantity. And my health is excellent.

Can you please explain how diseases or disorders can totally reverse?

The body heals itself. For example, if you fracture a bone, you don't need to give your body any medicine. You just need to give it some time to heal itself. There is an inherent healing process that goes on in the body which restores our health. The way you reverse dietary diseases is that you stop the repeated injury from the fork and spoon. As a consequence of changing your diet to a starch-based diet with fruits and vegetables, and eliminating the oils and animal foods (meat and dairy), the body has a chance to express its natural healing properties. It is simply a matter of stopping injury to the body which is caused by rich food. I call it food poisoning.

Do the right kind of foods help even when the problem has turned chronic?

That depends upon the phase of the problem, and how chronic the disease is. For example, you have blockages in the arteries due to the scar tissue. Those blockages cannot be expected to be reversed. But when it's chronic in terms of longstanding inflammation, due to repeated injury, most of the time it can be reversed. Problems like rheumatoid arthritis and other inflammatory arthritis are reversed in most cases. However, due to the longstanding problem, people are left with joint deformities. Hence, in cases where chronicity is quite intense, one can't expect reversal of disease based on the diet alone. For the rest, this option is cost-free as well as side-effect free.

So what is the right kind of diet according to you?

A starch-based diet with fruits and vegetables, with a moderate sprinkling of nuts and seeds, is the right diet. It should include whole grains and whole grain products like pastas, tortillas, and breads. Include potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn, rice, yams in your meals. Have lots of legumes in your diet in the form of bean soups and lentil soups. Use spices as condiments, and consume a minimum amount of salt and sugar. Stay away from dairy and animal products. A vitamin B 12 supplement tablet once a week completes the healthy diet. Nothing dulls our immune system more than oil or 'liquid fat' induced obesity.

But it is said that some fats, like omega-3 fats, are essential for good health...

Omega fats are produced by plants. No fish or other animal can produce it. Plant-based diets are inclusive. Moreover, nuts and seeds are enough to fulfill the oil requirements of our bodies.

How can one do away with the use of vegetable oils, especially in Indian cooking?

You simply have to stop using oil. In India, the amount of vegetable oil consumed has increased dramatically over the last decade, and so has poor health and obesity. Oils like flaxseed oil, corn oil, olive oil, and vegetable oil are not food. They are isolated concentrated nutrients that are extracted from the source. They are medicines at best, and toxins at worst. These oils get absorbed in the body making the skin oily and acne-laden, and induce weight gain. They promote cancer, and are toxic to the system. Eating vegetable oil in its natural form like in corn, or bean, or in potato, i.e., in an environment in which it is safe – surrounded by vitamins, minerals and other phytonutrients in a package – allows it to be properly metabolized. In that form it is not toxic.

Changing dietary habits is a difficult feat, more so because of mind conditioning. We all have been brought up with the concept of a balanced diet. How challenging is it to break this conditioning? And how do you tackle this challenge?

When people drop dairy and animal products, or give up oils, they always become healthy and fit. But how do you get them to make the change? It is difficult. However, the challenge is to make them realize that they are suffering from food poisoning. They need to understand what clean, proper, healthy food is, and that they can't simply treat this food poisoning as just a bad habit that they are going to deal with in time. They must take a strong decision. I have worked for the past 40 years in developing ways to get people to change. I have written 12 national best-selling books, done many free video seminars, do a 10-day residential program on making this transition, and have also come up with a company that provides the prescribed food to people.

There are various diet crusaders around. What is your take on those diets?

I have written a lot on low-carb and paleo diets. These diets are dangerous and unsustainable. If 55-80 per cent of your diet consists of animals, you would eat

Planet Earth to death sooner than is happening right now. This is not planet-friendly.

Can you please suggest the right kind of diet for a person in a regular eight hours job living in a metropolitan city?

In the Indian context, I would say that here people have traditionally been on a diet of lentils and legumes, dough, rice and vegetable dishes. These are the kinds of foods that people should have.

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