Flexitarianism (Flexible or Part-Time Vegetarianism): A User-Based Dietary Choice for Improved Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Many think that eating meat is nutritionally necessary and beneficial. Industrialising livestock production provides meat that is often “cheaper” than fruit and vegetables. In reality, this has come at a cost for human, animal and ecological welfare. Western mainstream meat consumption is a leading cause of increasing ill-health, diabetes, cancers, non-communicable and chronic diseases, malnourishment, obesity, antibiotic resistance, spread of infectious diseases, hunger and possible global epidemics as well as climate change, biodiversity loss, water and land degradation. Rather than stop this, vested interests continue to promote meat consumption. If people are deliberately misinformed or have no access to reliable information, what chance do they have to make the right food choices? This paper outlines flexitarianism (flexible vegetarianism) as a personal user-driven opportunity to combat the geopolitical and industrial duplicity about meat. Consumers should have enough information about the implications of their nutritional choices. In addition to health benefits, flexitarianism can help mitigate climate change, environmental and social destruction and reduce animal suffering. The proposed information policy interventions are assessed against their impact on key stakeholders and overall value for public health and environmental wellbeing. They offer an opportunity to reclaim personal health and improve the health of the planet.

Keywords: Diet, Environment, Flexitarianism, Health, Information, Meat, Policy, Sustainable

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INTRODUCTION

In the last four decades, meat production and consumption have significantly exceeded population growth. While population numbers have almost doubled, global meat production has tripled during this period with an increase of 20% in just the last ten years (Wordwatch Institute, 2013). Overall, supply of meat per person per year has been on a steady upward trend (see Figure 1).

In contemporary society, meat (unprocessed and processed red meat—beef, veal, pork and lamb, and poultry) has become accessible for billions of people and is often cheaper to buy than fruit and vegetables. Yet this increasing affordability has a cost for the overall wellbeing of people and the planet. This is felt differently in countries with greater or lesser food choices and the challenges for the developed and developing world are not the same. Various factors, including social and religious considerations, access to arable land, farming practices and production opportunities, are all having an impact on food choices. In the currently dominating model of development, the Western meat-rich diet is promoted as a better dietary option despite the growing evidence to the contrary.

Drawing on publicly available data and building on previous academic work, this paper offers some perspectives on the human and environmental consequences of current western meat consumption patterns. The sectors associated with meat production, including the livestock and pharmaceutical industries, have influenced many healthcare related areas within society affecting healthcare practices and recommendations, government dietary and health recommendations, academic research and food politics. This paper, through the promotion of user-based reduction in meat consumption, invites people to rethink their personal dietary choices arguing that this could improve individual health while at the same time benefiting the society and the planet. The “users” this paper targets are multiple actors, including lay individuals, professionals, policy makers and also “health professionals as well as patients and anyone who uses the web with a user name” (Biswas & Martin, 2011: ii)

Figure 1. Meat consumption per capita per year [kg]. Source of data: http://faostat.fao.org/site/610/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=610#ancor (accessed 1 July 2013).
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