

ProVeg is going to Parliament!

“Change can’t come soon enough”: Dr Hannah Short

On Tuesday 16th October, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Vegetarianism and Veganism will meet in Westminster to discuss whether public authorities have a duty to provide plant-based meals on every public sector menu, every day, as standard. This is on the back of The Vegan Society’s current “Catering for Everyone” campaign, with the hope of emulating Portugal’s recent success in securing legislative change making it mandatory to supply strict vegetarian meals in schools, hospitals, prisons, care homes and government buildings.

I, personally, am hopeful and, as a medical doctor, believe this change can’t come soon enough. My local hospital does, in fact, provide a separate vegetarian and vegan menu for in-patients – however, employees have a trickier time accessing nutritious plant-based food. Chips and beans are often the only available “plant-based” option in the hospital canteen; the vegetable soup is usually made with butter, pasta dishes are loaded with cheese, the salads are slathered in mayo. A standard canteen hot breakfast offering is bacon, sausages, scrambled egg & hash browns (granted, there may be a mushroom or two floating around but, again, usually in butter); ravenous medics chow down after long night shifts when dry toast and a banana just won’t do. Even in my pre-vegan days it never failed to astonish me that NHS canteens were always awash with the very foods we know can cause us harm.

Sustainability is the current buzz-word of the business-world, and the NHS is no exception. The UN recently stated that “the use of animals for food is the biggest environmental problem”. With this in mind, the provision of universal plant-based meals actually represents a business opportunity, and makes sense from both an environmental and public health perspective. It can be no coincidence that The Vegan Society’s “Catering for Everyone” campaign was launched on March 22nd: NHS Sustainability Day. On the very same day, Anglia Crown – food supplier to over 100 UK hospitals – had The Vegan Society trademark conferred on its range of newly developed plant-based meals. Scott Buckler, campaign manager for NHS Sustainability Day, welcomed this step forward saying: “Food plays a huge role in the sustainable development agenda within the NHS. It is hugely important we support environmentally-friendly and ethical vegan food and we commend both The Vegan Society and Anglia Crown.”

Whatever our dietary leaning, there can be no denial that we could all benefit from increasing our fruit and vegetable intake. The prevalence of chronic disease as a result of poor lifestyle choices is escalating at an alarming rate and life expectancy in some parts of the UK is now declining.

Many of us are overfed yet undernourished. In my work as a GP I see this on a daily basis. A recent patient encounter brought home to me just how far removed many of us are when it comes to nourishing and sustaining ourselves (and our planet). A hurried mother arrived for her appointment, three children in tow. More accustomed to seeing young hands and mouths sticky with chocolate and pop, I remarked on the fact that they were happily nibbling on carrot sticks and apple slices. Their mother smiled wearily and replied: "Well, I am glad someone approves. Their nursery has told me these are not appropriate snacks and that ham and cheese sandwiches would be a better choice ...". Flabbergasted. We have a long way to go.

And, yet, I remain optimistic. I believe this an exciting time for the plant-based movement and the fact that this issue has garnered enough attention to warrant a Parliamentary meeting in its own right speaks volumes. In these times of austerity, this also makes economic sense: after all, fresh fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and legumes are kinder on the wallet than animal products have ever been. The beauty of plant-based food is that everyone can enjoy it, regardless of dietary need, culture or faith; no one need feel left out and, in a modern world where feelings of isolation are soaring, this is no small consideration. A plant-based diet automatically excludes numerous common allergens, such as milk and eggs, and additionally reduces the risk of food-borne illnesses. A recent article in The Independent highlighted the link between poor nutrition in our prisons and the increased risk of reoffending; failing to respect the basic human right of adequate nutrition for those in custody is detrimental to society as a whole.

Dr Melanie Joy, Harvard-educated psychologist and co-founder of ProVeg International, speaks passionately about the importance of making behaviour change easier for all of us. In fact, to see a fundamental societal shift in attitude – for society to truly wake up to the urgency of our call - this is paramount. We need to normalise plant-based meals and show that they can be delicious and celebrated in their own right. Ensuring easy access to nutritious, healthy vegan meals in public sector institutions would be an enormous stride forward and, with Portugal's success, I believe this is not out of our reach.