

Dietary genocide: eating to an early death in Micronesia

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I was recently invited to the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) to take part in a national workshop on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases in the region. We focused particularly on a group of diseases collectively known as cardiovascular diseases, which include heart attacks, heart failure, strokes, hypertension, diabetes and kidney failure, to name the major conditions.

The good news about these diseases is that they are almost completely preventable. They are caused mainly by Fatty food such as canned and other imported meat (corned beef and turkey tails) and shortening, Alcohol, Salt from canned fish and canned vegetables, soy sauce and instant noodles as well as table salt, and Tobacco. Eat, Alcohol, Salt and Tobacco are the FAST way to die.

The bad news about these diseases is that they are now killing Micronesians FAST because people in the region have one of the worst diets in the world. The information on the number of deaths in the FSM is incomplete but in 1994 at least one person dies every second day from cardiovascular diseases - in other words one person every other day eats themselves to death!

Diabetes which is caused entirely by eating too much fatty and greasy food (not sweet foods as most people think - it's the deep-fry grease in the doughnut that causes the problem) is increasing rapidly here. A local doctor told me of a young Micronesia woman who asked if she could have her teeth removed. After examining a normal set of teeth the doctor asked the reason for the request. The young woman replied

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that in a few years she would have diabetes like all the adults in her family and the doctor's do not like extracting teeth from drabetics so she thought she should have her teeth out now. It is now considered almost normal that most middle-aged Micronesians will develop diabetes! In Nauru, for example, over half of all adults have diabetes.

However, diabetes and indeed most cardiovascular diseases are not normal and can be completely prevented and cured by a readily available "local medicine" in Micronesia. That "medicine" is the fish in the sea, the fruit on the trees, breadfruit, yams, taro, fresh green vegetables and the local lean chicken, in fact almost every food that is harvested locally. Most of what is imported here in cans and in cigarette

packets is slowly, and in many cases not so slowly, poisoning the population to death.

Western populations have now woke up to the causes of the cardiovascular diseases and have changed their diet and have reduced their smoking rates. Almost no one eats turkey tails in the West, it is not even considered fit food for pets. Most of what is found on the shelves of local super-

markets in the FSM is the food which is difficult to sell in western countries now. Fatty meat is the cheapest meat, canned fish in oil and salt is hardly eaten. Lard and shortening has been replaced by liquid vegetable oils. Because they cannot sell it in their own countries, western companies are dumping their cheap unhealthy foods on poorer countries such as the FSM and in the process dumping their diseases as well.

The cardiovascular diseases have fallen by more than 50% in many western countries over the last 30 years, while the opposite has happened in Micronesia. The imported food is slowly killing children many of whom basically live on white rice, bread, sugar and some fat. These foods provide almost none of the important vitamins and minerals that children need to grow. Vitamin A deficiency which leads to chest problems (pneumonia) and blindness is common problem here and an absolute crime! The food growing on the trees is full of this Vitamin and yet it rots on the ground or is fed to the pigs while FSM children die. Smoking cigarettes in front

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I have been here about 2-weeks and have found it almost impossible to get fresh fruit in a restaurant. In western countries everyone is advised to eat fresh fruit every day, to eat fresh green vegetables every day, to eat foods similar to breadfruit, yams and taro every day. We would like to advise western people to eat fresh fish every day as well, but it is not available.

In Micronesia all of the foods necessary for a long and healthy life grow easily. There is no reason why every person in the FSM should not have the perfect diet. More good news is that a person can eat as much local food as he or she likes. If your great grandfather ate it, then it is good food. After children finish breast feeding they should have fresh fruit every day for the rest of their lives. They should also start on fresh green vegetables, root vegetables and fresh fish. Anything that is imported in a can should be a treat, perhaps on your birthday! Cut down on the rice as well, local starch foods such as breadfruit, bananas, yams and the like are better.

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Our National FSM Workshop on ‘the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Disease’ has proposed a program known as the “Micronesia ONE DIET FITS ALL Today” (MODFAT) Program aimed at returning the population to a more traditional diet. Hospitals will be advised to develop a “local foods only” policy for patient meals, doctors will be advised to prescribe all patients with diabetes and other cardiovascular disease “local foods only” diets. Politicians will be lobbied to introduce policies which make local food cheaper and more available. It is ridiculous that imported food is cheaper than local food, although not surprising as it is being dumped in Micronesia by western companies who can’t sell it easily in their own countries.

The message is clear and I speak from experience because we have been there before in Western countries. Unless there is a dietary revolution Micronesians will eat themselves to an early death. □

**“ The proverb warns that
‘You should not bite the hand that feeds you’.
But maybe you should if it prevents you
from feeding yourself! ”**

*Thomas Szasz (1920). Psychiatrist.
Author of ‘The Second Sin’ and ‘Control and Self Control’*