

Nutrition, a key to healthy living

Admire Chinjekure and Mildred Mushinga argue for inclusion of anthropological perspectives in shaping nutrition messages

The field of public health and nutrition epidemiology studies the distribution and determinants of health events in specified populations, and applies these studies to control health problems.¹ Any public health interventions designed to control the undesirable health outcomes will rely on a holistic descriptive and analytical approach on the distribution of disease and its determinants. Quantitative analyses without a qualitative aspects are largely incomplete and may not lead to effective control of public health problems. Information concerning people's dietary habits is therefore crucial to understanding dietary factors that lead to epidemiological diversity and requires a dissection of the interrelation between cultural diversity, socio-economic status, environmental possibilities and individual preferences among populations. The anthropological studies of food and eating habits have therefore become important for understanding various problems in health.²

It has been widely observed that a growing middle class in Africa and the developing world has been associated with an increase in the incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). According to the 2018 WHO Global estimates, 78% of global NCD deaths occurred in low and middle-income countries.³ A double burden, comprising of over and under nutrition has thus emerged in the developing world. The focus on reducing the burden of NCDs has largely been on health, nutrition, promotion of modifiable lifestyles, particularly diet, and increase in physical activity and reduction of sedentary behaviour in population groups.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes health as 'A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'. This resonates with the common belief that a healthy individual is one who is in perfect balance with their environment.¹ Better nutrition throughout the lifecycle is associated with improved infant, child and maternal health, stronger immune systems, safer pregnancy and childbirth, lower risk of non-communicable diseases (such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease), and longevity.⁴ The interrelationship between culture, socio-economic status and health is essential in understanding the epidemiology of nutrition related problems and the solutions thereof. Food, health and the environment have a close link with an emphasis on balance.

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A person's lifestyle impacts on healthy living. Their choices and understanding or lack thereof, of healthy diets and physical activity are strongly associated with health outcomes and longevity and hence make a case for promoting good nutrition and its benefits. Milton Kamwendo, speaking at former Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe's 89th birthday celebration, said,

'Keep fit not fat. Health is never an accident. It will not come without daily effort and discipline. Your habits determine your state of health and mind. Eat healthy and you will live long. Discipline is not torture but the foundation of a longer, healthier life. His Excellency the President exercises daily and eats healthy. He loves natural and traditional foods. He has managed his weight well. Given the number of dinners he has to attend and the conferences he sits through, this is a feat. You are as fit as you decide to eat and exercise.'⁵

The former President of Zimbabwe lived to the age of 95 years. His status gave him wide eating choices but he opted for the healthier options. He was aware that his position required him to have cognitive and physical strength to function as a leader. He had the benefit of formal education, a personal health advisor at his disposal and most importantly, the discipline to follow a healthy lifestyle in the midst of plenty.

The common outcomes of good health and longevity identified above relate to cultural background on nutrition often defined literally as 'the eating of old'. Culture denotes codes of shared values and meanings even though individual vantage points may be different. Nevertheless the lifestyles chosen had undertones of what is generally known as the 'traditional way of life' associated with minimalistic diets, physical activity with positive health and nutrition consequences.⁶ The anecdote of Mugabe demonstrates that an understanding of the 'olden ways' of dietary habits is essential in shaping narratives for improving the nutrition and health outcomes of populations.

The high socio-economic status of President Mugabe presented unlimited access to various foods and potential eating habits detrimental to health but he chose to maintain the traditional eating habits preferring natural unrefined foods. Nutritionists and public health professionals invest time and resources developing nutrition education materials on 'healthy eating' in various formats. Most of the messaging is based on 'latest evidence' yet one observation from the anecdotes presented in this article is the common code of eating traditional foods that are wholesome, have less sugar, and less salt in addition to being physically active.

This review is in essence proposing the inclusion



of anthropological perspectives in shaping nutrition messages for healthy living. An understanding of anthropology allows public health specialists to have an appreciation of health and disease beyond physical and biological processes. This entails an acknowledgement of the importance of understanding people's social and cultural context in order to overcome barriers to the uptake of health and nutrition interventions to and develop culturally appropriate sustainable interventions. Using an anthropological perspective gives public health practitioners a vantage point of knowing what was practiced in the past and what worked for a particular population in addition to modern scientific methods that show cause and effect. Designing nutrition messages and the subsequent modes of delivery devoid of anthropological perspectives can miss some significant aspects of people's lives that are beneficial to building on healthy behaviours, despite improvements in wealth status and association with poor eating habits. In as much as the science of nutrition and its causal paths is robust and well defined, it is the messaging of what really works that ultimately determines the take up of positive nutritional behaviours amongst the population. To encourage nutrition messaging that people relate with requires a basic understanding of the targeted population's culture so as to promote healthy behaviours which are associated with desirable health outcomes. It is common to hear the local Zimbabweans refer to the 'western' diet as being responsible for the observed increasing nutrition disorders amongst the people, a realisation that locals have moved out of their cultural confines and adapted foreign cultures possibly to the detriment of their health. The proposed interdisciplinary collaboration with anthropology stems from the strong interrelationship between culture, changing socio-economic status and health.⁷

The emerging middle class in low and middle-income countries has largely been associated with

improving socio-economic status, globalisation trends and shifting cultures, some of which include unhealthy eating behaviours as a 'wealth statement' to show non-deprivation. The new middle class has adapted Western contemporary' lifestyles and eating habits negating 'ways of the old', albeit with undesirable health outcomes. Paradoxically, improving socio-economic status has been associated with an increase in NCDs due to unhealthy eating and more sedentary lifestyles. Nonetheless, nutritionists and public health practitioners can capitalise on the current wave of nostalgic focus on traditional natural foods which has hit the global public health village with catch statements like 'don't eat what your grandmother didn't' and 'go back to the ways of the old'. This is an example of an opportunity where nutritionists and public health professionals' appreciation of the importance of anthropological perspectives can shape nutrition messaging towards healthy living.

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