

The Road to Humanitarian Medical Care via Vegetarian Diet

An Approach Promoted by Tzu Chi Medical Foundation CEO, Dr. Lin Chin-Lon

Dr. Lin Chin-Lon is the CEO of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation. He was the first Asian Superintendent of the Northridge Hospital Medical Center. In 1993, he founded the first overseas Tzu Chi Free Clinic in the greater Los Angeles area. He returned to Taiwan and joined in the Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital in 1995.

In 1998, with the establishment of the Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA), a non-profit medical volunteer organization under Tzu Chi, he is the convener since then.

In 2000, he became the Superintendent of newly-established Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital, and promoted Tzu Chi's humanitarian medical care to the globe.



A Vegetarian Diet Is a Healthy Diet

By Ho Tzu-I

As a four-term president of the United States of America, Franklin D. Roosevelt led the country through the great depression and Second World War. He is recognized as one of the greatest US presidents. In April of 1945, after 73 days of Roosevelt's fourth term of presidency, he suddenly died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Just two months before his death, he attended the Yalta Meeting when his blood pressure was 260/150mm of mercury column. And ten years prior to this, during his second term of presidency, the measurement was 170/100.

In the modern era, it is well-recognized that high blood pressure needs medical care. The treatment involves medication, diet, exercise, and planned daily routines. Yet, Roosevelt's long-time personal doctor said, "The president is healthy, the readings are normal for a person of his age."

The doctor's judgement was based on the knowledge, scientific level, and technology of the mid-twentieth century. Even though cardiac catheterization and heart-lung machines technology progressed steadily, the causes of atherosclerotic plaque and thrombosis were not well understood at that time.

President Harry Truman signed the National Heart Act in 1948, which created

the National Heart Institute (NHI). One of the aggressive projects under NHI was the Epidemiological Generation Study, a research program headquartered in Framingham, Massachusetts. The study tracked the conditions of 5,300 healthy adults, age 30 to 59 years old, for 20 years.

The results of this research were disseminated to the medical community as well as to the public over the years. These results confirmed that heart diseases and strokes are closely related to high blood pressure. The results also revealed that factors such as smoking, obesity, and diabetes are some of the major causes of heart diseases. Many later public health policies were established based on these research results.



Dr. Lin Chin-Lon returned to Taiwan in 1995 and assumed the position of Deputy Superintendent of Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital as well as acting as a specialist in the Cardiology Department. He also served as a volunteer in free clinic services during his off-duty days.



Into Vegetarian Diet with Sincerity

Public awareness, such as warnings of cigarette smoking hazards, increased as a result of these studies. A formula that calculates the risk of a person suffering cardiovascular disease in the next ten years, called the Framingham risk index, was developed and had a significant impact on public health as well the effectiveness of modern medical research.

Do Not Hesitate to Change your Diet

Dr. Lin Chin-Lon had pulmonary artery surgery at the beginning of 2022. As Dr. Lin was recovering in the intensive care unit, he was busy collaborating with the editor of *Nutrients*, an international scientific journal, because the deadline for



publication was near and he needed to finish before the due date.

In his article, the results of a ten-year study indicated that the risk of dementia is relatively lower for vegetarians than for meat eaters. In the study, Dr. Lin led a team to scientifically investigate the relationship between human health and diet. The article published in the international journal concluded that a vegetarian diet reduces the risk of cardiovascular diseases, gout, elevated cholesterol, gallstones, depression, and diabetes. The side benefits of a vegetarian diet therefore include a significant reduction of health care expenses. Dr. Lin himself has been on a vegetarian diet for over forty years. This is partly because he is a dedicated Buddhist. But there is also another story that explains his change of diet.

When Dr. Lin was a cardiologist, practicing in California, he had an American patient of Italian descent. This gentleman was overweight, with high blood pressure and diabetes. He had frequent chest tightness and panting, and had difficulty climbing stairs. From all these symptoms, Dr. Lin correctly diagnosed that the patient had angina. Further examining his family medical history, Dr. Lin found that the patient's father and elder brother had diabetes and high blood pressure. A surprising coincidence was revealed from the following simple conversation.

“How old was your father when he



Dr. Lin was the organizer when Tzu Chi International Medical Association (TIMA) was first founded in 1998. Pictures show the TIMA annual convention at the Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital soon after the grand opening of the hospital in September 2000. Dr. Lin never stopped promoting vegetarian diets.

passed away?”

“Fifty-nine years old.”

“How old was your elder brother when he passed away?”

“Fifty-nine years old.”

“How old are you now?”

“Fifty-nine years old.”

“No further questions. I will arrange your hospital stay. Immediately.”

Cardiac catheterization inspection revealed that three of the patient’s arteries were blocked. There were no balloon dilation or stent placement techniques during that time. A team of specialists was immediately assembled to perform open-heart surgery to open the three clogged arteries.

One day after the patient was released from the hospital, he came to Dr.

Lin’s office with a box of chocolates. He said to Dr. Lin:” You Know? I am the first person in my family to live more than sixty years.” Just for that reason, he brought a box of chocolates to Dr. Lin Chin-Lon for celebration.

As a doctor, what more can one ask to see than a life being saved and the quality of life improved? But Dr. Lin thinks that he can achieve more. He thinks that, other than surgery and medication, there could be better ways for the treatment of cardiovascular diseases. He, therefore, focuses his effort to find the causes of vascular sclerosis. Within a short time, he found the primary insight, mentioned in many documents: “Do Not Hesitate to Change Diet.”

There is an old Chinese saying, “Illness



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finds its way in through the mouth.” A Western proverb says “You are what you eat.” The risk of heart disease is clearly higher for the meat eater, as cited frequently in many medical journals. These findings triggered Dr. Lin’s curiosity and made him do more research.

He also immediately became a pure vegetarian. Furthermore, he promotes vegetarian diets to prevent heart diseases. He tried very hard to convince people that without diet changes, heart surgery patients will sooner or later come back to the hospital, or, even worse, come back to the surgery room.

Globalizing the Vegetarian Diet

Passages in the Samyuktagama Sutras say, “The Dao to become the great King of Medicine involves four skills: knowing the illness, knowing the cause of illness, knowing the proper treatment, seeing to it that the illness is eliminated from its root.”

A good doctor knows how to exercise his expertise to relieve his patients’ suffering. An excellent doctor detects the cause of illness to prevent the recurrence of the patients’ suffering, therefore, extending the benefits to the public.

The causes for most of the diseases of the modern era are easily identified. Dr. Lin points out that our diet plays a very important role in those. In 2020, about 12% of Taiwan’s population identified



Dr. Lin leads the involvement of all the Tzu Chi Hospitals in the International Network of Health Promoting Hospitals program under the World Health Organization, in advancing the quality of healthcare, promoting vegetarian diets and improving public health.

themselves as vegetarians, a clear increase over prior years.

Other than religion, the reasons for their diet change included: health, environmental protection, compassion for animals, and personal choice. These diet changes were unthinkable 30 years ago. To convince the public of vegetarian diet benefits, Dr. Lin conducted a scientific research project to prove his point.

The project was conducted in Dalin Tzu Chi Hospital. Questionnaires from 12,000 participants were collected and analyzed. The initial findings indicated that chronic disease patients were more likely to be on a vegetarian diet. However, further analysis indicated that a significant

number of patients converted to vegetarian diets after they were diagnosed with cancers.

The result was biased because of the limitation of a cross-sectional study. It reflects the specific phenomenon at a specific point of time. It does not reflect the real cause and the long-term trend of the phenomenon. Because of this, Dr. Lin initiated a new research project.

This new project was partnered with a family doctor (also named Dr. Lin) in 2007. For two years, they assembled more than 5,000 volunteers. They conducted detailed interviews with the volunteers. The information they obtained from the volunteers included: medical history, health conditions, dietary habits, lifestyle, etc. A longer-term follow-up is being monitored. The project is ongoing.

Dr. Lin has also established the Taiwan Vegetarian Nutrition Association. To promote health awareness, this association actively collects and distributes medical findings to the public and distributes decision-enabling information to the medical community. At the same time, the association effectively promotes the benefits of vegetarian diets to the world and these recommendations are more and more accepted by an international network of health promoting hospitals. The network adopted serving pure vegetarian food during conferences.

Vegetarian diets are gradually becoming an accepted international

trend. However, along the way there are obstacles and sometimes even deliberate objections. In response to these, Dr. Lin says: "There are three basic benefits of the diet: health, environmental protection, and spiritual. We deliver our findings, but respect others for their choices."

Dr. Lin is almost eighty years old, but he is still very energetic when he is doing things that he thinks are benefiting other people. Faith, commitment, and cultivation are the three basic principles of Buddhism. Dr. Lin has strong faith, steady vows, and a committed vegetarian in addition to his respect to the great teacher of Tzu Chi.

In these days of severe global climate change, Dharma Master Cheng Yen strongly emphasizes the importance of vegetarian diets. She is doing her best to promote the movement from the academic point of view with a public health education approach. The top research organization for vegetarian food in the world is probably Loma Linda University in California, followed by the University of Oxford in England.

With a large number of academic papers published and authored by Tzu Chi researchers, Taiwan is ranked number three in this field. The continuous efforts of Tzu Chi researchers and their contribution to healthy diet recommendations will have a significant impact on the world, just like the contributions coming from the Framingham studies to the field of heart diseases.