

Life & Times

Resetting the table for UK health:

meals as medicine set to revolutionise general practice

Amidst the sights, sounds, and energy of a professional kitchen in full lunch service, chefs and assistants darted around among a unique collection of culinary students, gently directing them in the preparation of the perfect spaghetti bolognese. Supplied by Watts farm, delicious organic ingredients were being transformed into various versions of this simple dish, ranging from a nutritionally basic minced-meat classic, to a lentil nutritional powerhouse scoring high in fibre, low in saturated fat, and low on the glycaemic index.

This was no ordinary cookery class. On 24 February 2018, a landmark pilot course teaching doctors how to cook was hosted by Westminster Kingsway College, a UK centre for culinary excellence. This seminal culinary training programme was undertaken by 16 doctors under the guidance of a team of professional chefs, doctors, and nutritionists. Notable support in preparation for the course came from Professor David Foskett, MBE, an eminent educator and member of the Academy of Culinary Arts, Dr Rachel Edwards, and Gary Hunter of Westminster Kingsway College.

Culinary Medicine UK (CMU) is a new not-for-profit organisation spearheaded by London-based GP Dr Rupy Aujla with a multidisciplinary team of fellow GPs, junior doctors, registered dietitians, nutritionists, and psychologists. As a pioneer in this field, there could be no better purveyor of CMU. Dr Aujla's passion for nutritional intervention derives from his own experience of reversing ill health using diet and lifestyle alone.

Culinary medicine is a relatively new evidence-based field, blending the art of cooking with the science of medicine.^{1,2} Although new to the UK, a course combining culinary arts and medical training is established in the US, led by Dr Tim Harlan of the Goldring Center for Culinary Medicine at Tulane Medical School in New Orleans. In his mission to bring culinary medicine to the UK, Dr Aujla attended the US course and

in partnership with Tulane has meticulously modified and adapted the content to generate a UK-specific version of the programme.

Dr Aujla is not alone in his thinking that what we put on our plates is one of the most important lifestyle factors for better health. With the social media explosion of doctors and clinical professionals delivering evidence-based tools and tips, there is a strong growing trend for food and lifestyle medicine. Given the sheer volume of lifestyle-related illness and the fact that GPs receive on average less than 15 hours of undergraduate nutrition training, there is a clear necessity for thorough nutrition education in UK medical schools. So far, the RCGP has accredited four of CMU's modules. Based on promising evidence of course impacts,³ the plans going forward are to create a full diploma course for roll-out into all UK medical schools to enhance current nutrition education.

LEARNING ON THE JOB

The course pilot day itself consisted of three stages. First, attendees completed some online module content; this was followed by an introduction to the programme on the day led by Dr Aujla and Elaine Macaninch, a senior dietician. Next, the doctors entered the kitchen for 2 hours of practical cooking, with chef Vince Kelly teaching core culinary skills and delivering ingredient knowledge. The attendees worked in groups to produce dishes that were then subject to a clinical case-based discussion over lunch, where candidates got the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of their labour. The cases sparked lively debate among the doctors about the importance of mindful eating, the benefits of simple ingredient substitutions, and how to translate these skills and knowledge into a format they could communicate to their patients. Dr Aujla is the first to point out:

'Nobody is expecting doctors to teach their patients how to cook, but with these skills in hand they can use their knowledge to

guide patients to create positive changes to their diet and get them involved in easy home cooking.'

Keen observers of the pilot included presenter and food writer Prue Leith of *The Great British Bake Off*, representatives from Jamie Oliver's *Ministry of Food*, and correspondents from BBC Radio 4, who interviewed participants for the BBC *Food Programme*.⁴

Compared with pre-course baselines, post-course survey data showed unequivocal improvements in the doctors' nutrition knowledge and confidence in suggesting nutritional changes to patients. If this is an early indicator for the barometer of success for CMU, the potential for significant change in education looks extremely promising and beckons further research.⁵ Planning is now well underway for the next schedule of GP courses — the waiting list is building steadily, so jump aboard, as CMU is set to soar!

Moushumi Baruah,

GP, London; Research Director, Culinary Medicine UK, London.

Email: moushumi.baruah@nhs.net

Katie N Parker,

Psychologist and Behavioural Science Research Consultant, Institute of Education, University College London, London.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp18X698093>

REFERENCES

1. La Puma J. What is culinary medicine and what does it do? *Popul Health Manage* 2016; **19(1)**: 1–3.
2. La Puma J, Marx RP. *ChefMD's big book of culinary medicine: a food lover's road map to: losing weight, preventing disease, getting really healthy*. New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2009.
3. Monlezun DJ, Kasprovicz E, Tosh KW, et al. Medical school-based teaching kitchen improves HbA1c, blood pressure, and cholesterol for patients with type 2 diabetes: results from a novel randomized controlled trial. *Diabetes Res Clin Pract* 2015; **109(2)**: 420–426.
4. Dillon S. We learn nothing about nutrition, claim medical students. *BBC News* 2018; **25 Mar**: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-43504125> [accessed 5 Jul 2018].
5. Polak R, Phillips EM, Nordgren J, et al. Health-related culinary education: a summary of representative emerging programs for health professionals and patients. *Global Adv Health Med* 2016; **5(1)**: 61–68.

"Nobody is expecting doctors to teach their patients how to cook, but with these skills in hand they can use their knowledge to guide patients to create positive changes to their diet and get them involved in easy home cooking."