

Power Up with Plants

Sandra Musial, MD, is passionate about food, its impact on health and sharing that knowledge with others. So she, along with two other doctors who share her passion, started a group called **Plant Docs**. In pre-pandemic days, the Plant Docs ran five-week workshops in the basement of vegan food hall Plant City that taught people how to embrace a whole food, plant-based diet. “Pairing medical intervention with a restaurant is a cool concept,” said Musial. “It’s about health, but it’s also about enjoying food.” I recently spoke with Dr. Musial about the health-transforming power of plants.

Emily Olson (Motif): When it comes to their diet, what do Americans get wrong?

Sandra Musial: The traditional western American fare is leading to crazy levels of obesity, hypertension, diabetes, cancer. All of these are diseases of the western world. Countries that are still eating from the land have lower rates of all of these diseases. Instead of eating whole foods — fruits and vegetables, whole grains and legumes — people are eating highly processed foods with lots of added sugars, oils and refined flours. I work at a pediatric obesity clinic and there are kids who in an entire day will never eat a fruit or vegetable.

EO: School-provided lunches must drive you mad.

SM: I think if we improved school lunches, it would have a mass effect on the whole US population. And children would bring that education home. A few years ago, WIC [the nutritional program for women, infants and children] improved the quality of their food package by limiting juice and decreasing refined flours and flour products. The national rates of obesity in that 3- to 5-year-old range went down, and they think it’s attributed to this mass improvement in the federal WIC package.

EO: What impact can a whole food diet have on health?

SM: You can reverse many of the diseases of the western world. Obesity, Type II Diabetes can be reversed, you can open some of the plaque in the coronary arteries. Studies have shown that end-stage cardiac patients, when put on a strict healthy diet, can add years to their life.

EO: Then why do we turn to medicine to correct these problems?

SM: I don’t know that people are being told it’s an option. But if every doc said, “You can go on this pill that you can take for the rest of your life and have surgery and die early, or you can have a lifestyle change,” people still might not want to make changes.

EO: Is it an economic issue?

SM: There is some truth to that. Broccoli is more expensive than soda, but on the same budget, if you buy dried beans and that’s your protein, that’s the most economic and nutritious protein there is. It’s more complicated than that, of course. People who live in the inner city don’t always have access to fresh whole foods. And it’s a multigenerational thing. If that [style of eating] is all you’ve ever known, it’s hard to get away from it.

EO: So what’s the answer?

SM: I think we have to have a multi-pronged approach to education, and I think it has to start with one-on-one at the doctor's office. Medical schools have to do a better job teaching future doctors about nutrition. And there needs to be more community and government involvement to reverse what has happened [in food policy] over the last 30 years.

EO: Tell me about the Plant Docs classes.

SM: We limited each class to 20 people who want to learn the importance of eating plant based. Each participant would meet one-on-one with a doctor at the beginning and the end of the series, and we'd send them to a lab for blood work during the first and last weeks. Participants come from all walks of life. We've had vegetarians who want to give up dairy and want more ideas for vegan cooking, and we've had people who are scared after a heart attack. If there were enough people, I'd love to do a series with special interest groups.

EO: Any final thoughts?

SM: [Holistic health practitioner] Ann Wigmore said, "Food can be the most powerful form of medicine or the slowest form of poison." I love that. Our cells become what we feed them. If you feed them whole foods, they become healthy, boost your immunity and fight disease. Or you can slowly kill yourself. You really are what you eat.

The Plant Docs will resume classes when it is safe to do so. Email sandy@plantdocspvd.com to get on a mailing list. For more information, go to fb.com/plantdocspvd or plantdocspvd.com. Scholarships for classes are available.