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Local Health

By Terry Burns, UVMC President/CEO

In our valley, lots of people are interested in "keeping it local." I'm especially in favor of it when it means keeping people healthy. One area where the local economy and local health can improve simultaneously is by growing our local food economy.

Members of the hospital's Nutritional Services staff have brought some interesting facts to my attention, so I thought I'd share them.

- Antibiotics and other pharmaceuticals used in animals who produce human food may reduce human resistance to some diseases.
- New evidence-based research shows that produce picked at the peak of its ripeness has higher nutritional value than produce picked green and transported hundreds of miles.
- Currently, food grown in America often travels more than 1,000 miles to reach its end use. This increases our fuel consumption. (Apparently, food distribution counts for a significant percent of carbon emissions in our country.)
- Diabetes and obesity are reaching epidemic proportions among Americans, and there is a direct relationship between corn syrup production and levels of obesity here. Sugar has an enzyme that tells the body when it has had enough—corn syrup does not.
- Investing in local food economies can reduce health care costs and increase the number of local jobs (which could then lead to a higher local tax base).

So, what does this mean to each of us as food consumers (and potentially food producers)? Well, at the hospital, we're working on ways to form partnerships with local producers so we can use locally-grown food in our cafeteria. We're also trying to help educate folks about ways to eat better by supporting seminars on that topic.

Personally, I suppose I'd say we can all be a little more aware. Transformational behavior change is a tough thing to bring about. However, with many small steps, the transformation can occur. We now have a Farmers' Market year-round in Ukiah. The Ukiah Natural Foods Co-op and other local grocery stores offer healthy, locally-produced choices. Awareness is a funny thing. Once something is brought to your attention, you see it everywhere. And, markets respond to demand. If food producers see that there's a demand for healthy, locally-produced food, guess what they'll offer?

I had the privilege recently to travel to the Live Power Farm in Covelo. It is a farming operation that truly harkens back to an older day, using horses and pulled plows, organic practices and non-chemical pest/weed control methodologies. The folks who work there are clearly committed to true sustainability – everything is used and reused elsewhere in the food production process. It's an exciting model of a process committed individuals can choose. "Organic" means many different things, but certainly the Live Power Farm's produce is really a "wow." Our county has many organic farms. I've also had several opportunities to visit Covelo Organic Vegetables' farm, also in the Covelo area. While they do use tractors, their methods are exclusively organic. When you tour these farms, you see the cycle of farming played out in the layout of the fields. Each succeeding planting builds on the composting and natural fertilizers created from the end of the proceeding growth, augmented with other on-site compost products – again – true recycling. I encourage you to visit either of these great farming examples. Speak with the staff there and learn how you can obtain access to their produce (the Farmers' Market is a great place) and become inspired on how you can perhaps incorporate at least some of their methods in to your own gardening activities.

Sometimes, people who don't understand the processes related to growing and caring for vegetables become concerned for the safety of the food supply. Recently I saw some congressional legislation that may restrict Farmers' Markets around the country. This seems overprotective and counter productive to better nutrition and, frankly, the better tasting fresh food only available at a Farmers' Market-type operation. It is interesting that our most recent national food scares have recently occurred with crops tightly monitored by the federal government. The adage "wash it completely, and if appropriate, cook it completely, too" are often forgotten. Enjoy truly fresh vegetables soon and often.

I'm always happy to hear from readers about this or other health-related topics. I can be reached at 707.463.7360.