

Spend Our Health Dollars at the Dinner Table

Every modern economy in the world has found that no matter how much money you sink into health, more is always needed. An additional billion dollars of health budget doesn't always mean that you're going to get a billion dollars worth of extra healthcare out of it.

Advanced medical imaging machines can cost millions. A new provincial hospital may cost \$40M. The latest whizz-bang vaccination campaign may cost \$200M (possibly saving a handful of lives a year, if that). But all this ignores a basic, unfashionable fact: the only scientifically proven way to save many thousands of New Zealand lives a year is by moderately improving diet and lifestyle habits. Rates of heart disease, cancer, and diabetes would fall dramatically. For instance, research indicates that at least 60% of colorectal cancer cases — thought to be one of the top three killer cancers in the developed world — might be prevented by moderate,



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inexpensive lifestyle and dietary changes. If there was a job which could do this, hundreds of millions of dollars would be spent on a high-profile, targeted campaign utilising the skills of thousands of healthcare professionals to make sure that as many New Zealanders as possible got it. Instead, a fraction of that amount is spent a year on generic TV ads and other promotional activities encouraging Kiwis to eat "five plus a day" and

to become active and "press play". Not bad, but hardly what is needed either. The high-tech ambulance at the bottom of the cliff remains a far more fashionable and interesting place to spend health dollars.

There are committees of highly qualified people set up to evaluate new drug treatments and vaccinations. The processes for introducing new drugs is well-established and resourced. Healthcare experts don't lobby for broccoli, they lobby for expensive drugs. What is needed is for the same level of respect, resourcing and focus to go into specific programmes and initiatives encouraging New Zealanders to eat their fresh fruits and vegetables, and to get some exercise every day. Why? Because the real war against cancer, diabetes and heart disease does not occur in hospitals, doctors' surgeries and pharmacies: it occurs at the dinner table, at the gym and on the field. Or at least, it should.

This content reflects personal opinions of Dr Tat Loo, a Dunedin-based chiropractor.

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