GLOBAL DAIRY PLATFORM

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New Article Suggests Recommendations to Cut Animal-Sourced Food Production and Consumption Often Based on Faulty Data

An Interview with Professor Alice Stanton

Introduction:
A new article by esteemed health/nutrition researcher Dr. Alice Stanton details why diets promulgated by the Global Burden of Disease Risk Factor Collaborators, the EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet and Health, and several others are underestimating the importance of animal-sourced foods, including dairy. The article entitled, *Unacceptable use of substandard metrics in policy decisions which mandate large reductions in animal-source foods*, which appeared in NPJ Science of Food suggests, among other things, that major studies recommending plant-based diets containing minimal amounts of animal sourced foods as healthier are often based on bad data and flawed assumptions.

Dr. Stanton is a professor at the School of Pharmacy and Biomolecular Science, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. In recent years, she and several colleagues have been critical of data and assumptions used in numerous publications which promote the premise that we must produce and consume far fewer animal-sourced foods if we are to improve the health of people and the planet.

Dr. Stanton, who has conducted a webinar on the topic for Global Dairy Platform (GDP) and spoke at the GDP NOURISH conference last Fall, was gracious enough to sit down with us recently to discuss her newest publication.

Her responses to our questions are below:

GDP: Dr. Stanton, you have been quite vocal in recent years regarding the quality of the data used by several organizations suggesting that humans dramatically cut their intake of animal-sourced foods. What are some of the shortcomings you see in these recommendations?

Dr. Stanton: It is of huge concern to me that many recent very influential reports, including those from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) Risk Factor Collaborators; the EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health; and the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change, have recommended dramatic reductions or total exclusion of animal-sourced foods, particularly ruminant products (red meat and dairy), from the human diet. These groups argue that these dietary changes will benefit both the environment and human health.

However, as described in my recent paper, these reports used unpublished and/or selective, oftentimes uncertain data to support their claims, and have used curve smoothing techniques which created or considerably inflated the risks of animal-sourced foods. Furthermore, they, in large part, only considered the risks of excessive consumption of animal-sourced foods and omitted the dangers of nutritional deficiencies. Importantly, they ignored the lessor bioavailability of protein and key micronutrients from plant-sourced foods versus animal-sourced foods.

GDP: Can you provide a couple of examples of studies you've seen where data used to support an anti-animal protein stance were used inappropriately?

Dr. Stanton: The EAT-Lancet planetary health diet largely consists of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and unsaturated plant oils, and only 13% of calories are from animal-sourced foods. When the EAT-Lancet Commission first published this diet, they expressed confidence that the diet would meet nutritional requirements of all adults and children older than 2 years. However, after considerable questioning from nutrition experts, it is great that at least some of the EAT-Lancet Commissioners have acknowledged the first version of the planetary health diet would result in significant essential micronutrient shortfalls. This particularly pertains to micronutrients found in higher quantities, and in more bioavailable forms, in animal-source foods, such as vitamin B12, calcium, iron, and zinc. In order to achieve micronutrient adequacy, intakes of animal-sourced foods would have to be twice that recommended in the first EAT report, accounting for at least 27% of calories (Beal et al 2023).

GDP: What is your perspective regarding our current global food system–the ways we produce, process, distribute, consume, and dispose of foods? Are changes required?

Dr. Stanton: In 2024, we face global climate and biodiversity crises. It is clear that food production and food consumption contribute importantly to both of these crises. Hence, yes, we do need to make changes to our food system so that all have access to healthy diets, while at the same time safeguarding the planet's health. What we need to decide is how that is best achieved – how much change should come from each section of the food system, how much change from food production, processing, distribution and retailing, and how much from consumption?

GDP: Any thoughts on how the dairy industry is doing in this regard? What we're doing well? What can we improve upon?

Dr. Stanton: There is good evidence that up to 3 helpings a day of full-fat dairy products (milk, cheese, yogurt, and butter) protects against both nutritional deficiencies and against chronic diseases including obesity, heart attacks, strokes, and breast and colon cancer. It is disappointing that the worldwide average intake of dairy is less than 1 helping a day. Hence from a human health perspective, it can be argued that dairy production should be increased.

However, the dairy industry, like all agriculture sectors, does contribute to global greenhouse gas emissions (GHGEs), and also to air and water pollution. These environmental impacts vary from geographical region to region, and with different production practices - GHGEs vary from 1 to 15 kg CO2eq per kg milk. Hence, there is obvious scope for improvement. It is my understanding that the dairy industry does have programs in place, like Pathways to Dairy Net Zero, that are designed to help mitigate these issues. Time will tell.

GDP: In the past, we know you have brought your concerns to several global health and nutrition organizations, particularly those that have been instrumental in promoting dramatic changes in our food system. How have these concerns been handled by the organizations you've approached?

Dr. Stanton: Happily, a number of recent reports from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have recognized and highlighted the weaknesses and errors in both the EAT-Lancet and the Global Burden of Disease 2019 studies. However other agencies continue to be influenced. The Livewell Diet, which is the healthy sustainable diet recommended by the World Wildlife Fund includes even less animal-source foods than does the Eat-Lancet's Planetary Health Diet. Hence, the statement in the executive summary of the report that "Livewell Plates are representative diets that meet national nutritional requirements" does not appear credible. The Nordic Nutrition Recommendations (NNR) 2023 recently ranked diets high in processed meat, and diets high in unprocessed red meat, as the second and fourth highest dietary risk factors, respectively, for mortality, in the Nordic and Baltic countries. It is cause for considerable concern that the evidence for this ranking is unpublished – apparently it will be included in the as-yet unpublished Global Burden of Diseases, Injuries, and Risk Factors Study 2021.

GDP: In short, what do you believe would be the long-term health and environmental consequences if most people on the planet adopted an EAT-Lancet type diet or other similar dietary regimens?

Dr. Stanton: Given the contribution of moderate, rather than very low, consumption of animal-source foods to protein and micronutrient adequacy, global adoption of an EAT-Lancet type diet would result in considerable increases in child and maternal malnutrition, iron deficiency anemia, and elderly sarcopenia or fragility.

I will leave it to the agriculture and environment experts to answer whether global adoption of an EAT-Lancet type diet is feasible, and if so whether it would benefit the environment. My opinion is that to protect the environment and for climate chaos to be averted, all sections of the food system: production, processing, distribution, and consumption, of both animal-source and plant-source foods, must become truly sustainable and climate neutral. Some sectors, like dairy, are making progress. But more collectively must be done.

GDP: If you got on an elevator with someone who asked you what they should eat to improve their health and that of the planet, what would you tell them before you reached the 7th floor?

Dr. Stanton: Eat a wide range of whole (natural and minimally processed) foods – both plant and animal-sourced. Avoid ultra-processed foods.

If at least 30% of your calories are not from meat, seafood, dairy and eggs, consult a nutritionist, if possible, for advice on a balanced diet, and on necessary supplements.

Where you can, choose sustainably sourced foods. As reliable and authentic environmental sustainability labels become more prevalent in some regions globally, choose products carrying green (better) labels if affordable. Over time, I hope that this sort of objective information is available for consumers globally.

GDP: Some great insights and excellent advice. Thank you very much for your time.

Dr. Stanton: My pleasure.