



Cleaning-up in Nutrition



Sian Porter, MSc(Econ) BSc(HONS) RD MBDA,
Freelance Consultant Dietitian – @dietitiansian

An editorial in this publication in April 2016¹ highlighted the rise of unqualified social media ‘celebrities’ providing nutrition advice. Although since then there have been murmurings of a backlash, with a few pieces in the media about things going too far, the whole wellness movement continues apace. Indeed, the same newspapers which have published articles warning about the dangers of the ‘clean eating’ trend employ the very same social media ‘celebrities’ to write a column in their publications. For a lot of these people their vlog, YouTube channel, website, blog, and Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat accounts, are centred on clean eating - demonstrating how and what they eat, along with advising others to do the same. A *Spectator* article last year entitled ‘*Not just a fad: the dangerous reality of ‘clean eating’*’,² with the strap line ‘*the trendy nutritional advice that’s more likely to make you ill than healthy*’, was its second most read article of 2015. Even the much loved *The Great British Bake Off* succumbed in the last series,³ setting the contestants sugar-free cake, gluten-free pitta bread and dairy-free arctic roll challenges. Clean eating is now so widespread that there are magazines, cafes and sections in the supermarket dedicated to it.

Defining ‘clean’

If you put the search term ‘definition of clean eating’ into Google today, you get nearly two million results. Historically, knowing if a food was ‘clean’ - in other words not rotten, contaminated, infested or off - would have been a matter of life or death. Traditionally, some religions view certain foods as unclean and have strict rules about their avoidance and handling. In the clinical sense, ‘clean food’ can mean food for patients who are immunosuppressed, such as those post-transplant requiring scrupulous food selection, storage, handling, preparation and serving. It means much the same in food hygiene terms. Today the term ‘clean eating’, rather like the term ‘superfood’, has no

official definition or root. To most it’s not eating anything processed or eating food in its most natural state, to others it’s a plant-based/vegan diet, gluten-free, dairy-free, meat-free, organic, raw - the list goes on.

Everyone’s an expert

Something else that has no real definition is what these self-appointed, social media nutrition, health and wellbeing ‘experts’ call themselves. Health coach, wellness blogger, nutrition coach, naturopathic nutritionist, fitspo, wellness warrior, foodie, chef are just some of the titles or self-styling, and that’s before you have even taken in their ‘handle’ or brand name.

Much of their nutrition knowledge is questionable, riddled with inaccuracies and misinterpretation, based on 'bad science' at best, or personal experience, or beliefs at worst. Their ideology commonly has rigid rules and categorises foods into 'good' and 'bad' either directly or indirectly. For many their only qualification is they are young, thin, fit and glamorous. Often they have had a health problem that they have 'cured' and want to let everyone know about it. The underlying message being: *'If you eat like us, you'll look like us/have a bit of our lifestyle'*.

There is an assumption of expertise from their followers, many whom hang on their every word. Yet some social media pseudo-nutritionists would appear to have little or no sense of responsibility, particularly when giving advice about cutting out food groups, fact checking (Milk leaching calcium from your bones? Almond milk being a rich source of vitamin A?), or that eating shouldn't be about health but about looks. Worryingly, they lack the rigorous scientific knowledge of anatomy, physiology and biochemistry that health professionals have. Yet, overstep the mark in the advice they confidently hand out. There is a big difference between sharing a recipe and sharing a recipe that you mark suitable for the heavily criticised 'GAPS diet' which you actively support. Part of the reason these social media personalities can say what they like is they have none of the rigorous codes of conduct or ethics that health professionals have to adhere to and seem to be ignorant of, or choose to ignore, measures put in place to protect the public, such as the EU Nutrition and Health Claims Regulation. This then means they can happily sell and endorse supplements, foodstuffs and other merchandise on their websites.

Tess Ward and Ella Mills (Deliciously Ella) have degrees in History of Art,^{4,5} and Madeleine Shaw has a degree in Ancient History.⁶ When Madeleine Shaw was questioned on the video she posted on YouTube⁶ about how she got to be where she is today, why if she was so interested in nutrition did she not study to become a registered dietitian or nutritionist, Madeleine Shaw appears to neatly sidestep the question. The Helmsley sisters state on their website:⁷ *'We are not qualified nutritionists, or dieticians. The information on this website has been developed following years of personal research, case studies and our own experiences with nutrition.'* Whilst they go on to state *'...you should consult a healthcare professional...'*, what if the same disclaimer was on a website for house design or straightening

teeth but you substituted the word 'nutritionist' or 'dietitian/dietician' for 'architect' or 'dentist' – would you employ them to design your house or fix your smile? Probably not, yet, thousands of people listen to nutrition advice given out by those who appear to be no more qualified than they are. Many have studied online at questionable 'institutes of nutrition' or have a diploma in naturopathic nutrition. A recent documentary on BBC3 entitled *'Clean Eating's Dirty Secrets'*⁸ showed the presenter, vlogger Grace Victory, applying online for, and receiving in the post, a diploma qualifying her as a 'raw nutritionist' for £29 after 'studying' online for one month. In the same documentary, when Natasha Corrett, the founder of Honestly Healthy, which promotes the alkaline diet, was challenged that the food we eat does not affect the body's pH she tellingly refused to answer the question. She also refused to answer another question in relation to the father of the alkaline diet, 'Dr' Robert O Young, who is currently in prison for practicing medicine without a licence.

A world of confusion

Confusion reigns in the land of clean eating with conflict and contradiction depending on what you read and who you follow. Sugar is a classic example. The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) 2015 Carbohydrates and Health report⁹ advice was to limit free sugars. Free sugars are defined in the report as: *'...those added to foods plus those naturally present in fruit juices, syrups and honey. It does not include the sugars naturally present in intact fruit and vegetables or dairy products.'* Yet many of the bloggers eschew table sugar whilst advocating the use of raw, cane and coconut sugar, honey and other syrups. Even 'The Great British Bake Off' got it wrong with their sugar-free cakes being allowed to contain honey and agave syrup, spreading the misinformation. Other points of confusion occur as the web is 'worldwide', so things can vary enormously from country to country and advice that may be relevant in, say, the US is not applicable here, due to different legislation and formulation. Another example is the whole idea of processing being evil. The excellent blog from Anthony Warner, Angry Chef,¹⁰ has unpicked the whole idea that all processed, convenience foods are bad for you. How many times do we reach for a tin of tomatoes? And how do these people think the oil got out of the coconut?

“Confusion reigns in the land of clean eating with conflict and contradiction depending on what you read and who you follow. Sugar is a classic example.”

Whilst anything that encourages eating more vegetables and fruit (although some warn about fruit having too much sugar), cooking from scratch, and increasing variety through trying new foods and recipes, is to be encouraged, it should not be at any price. Particularly not if the result is unbalanced, expensive, complicated, time consuming, all consuming, extreme, unsustainable, socially isolating and fosters superiority and a poor relationship with food. The idea that there is 'clean' instantly means that the opposite must be 'dirty', thus making health exclusive, expensive, out of reach and special.

Much of the language – for example, foods to eat and foods to avoid, guilty treat or cheats – and ideology used in these blogs and social media is close to that of eating disorders. There have been accusations that this advice can push people towards orthorexia, an unhealthy obsession with eating healthy food where they systematically avoid foods and drink they consider to be harmful, leading to extreme dietary restrictions (including calories), social isolation, lack of variety and, ironically, ill health. The underlying message of these social media nutrition advisors, whether intended or not, seems to be moral superiority. Their aspirational way of eating allegedly frees you from guilt if you choose the 'good' foods and nourishes not just your body but your mind and soul too.

The idea that one size fits all is ridiculous. Just because something has worked for them – and often they have had very specific health problems – does not work for everyone else. Many have also admitted to not having had a healthy relationship with food in their past.

Many people have realised that a celebrity lifestyle is unattainable, bearing no resemblance to their own. However, these wellness bloggers are much more accessible and could possibly be your big sister, friend or work colleague. Their bodies, looks and lifestyle are aspirational and they offer a sense of belonging to the 'in crowd' in just one click! Wellness is a new status symbol where you can flash your designer juice, talk about your spiraler and fill your bookshelves with the latest cookbooks.

We need to come clean!

But should we be surprised that this is who people listen to? The Waitrose Food

and Drink report 2015,¹¹ stated that 80% of us do not trust the health advice we receive. So what can healthcare professionals do? It's easy to scoff at these gorgeous self-publicists, and we don't all want to be 'instafamous', but can we learn some lessons from their carefully styled and curated worlds and their commercial acumen. Dietitians Helen West and Rosie Saunt have done just that, launching the excellent 'Rooted Project',¹² which aims to give popular, evidence-based nutrition advice, food and recipes at fun events.

An important step for healthcare professionals is to be aware of these trends and what's being said and sold on social media. If questioned, we need to give our professional opinion, pointing out the positives, like increasing fruit and veg intake, and the negatives, like unnecessarily cutting out gluten, whilst encouraging people's desire to eat better and respecting their choices. Get involved in social media. If you see something that is factually wrong – correct it. Stick to nutrition facts.

Nutrition is a science of caveats. How many nutrition questions can be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'? Although, this is what people want. *'Years of claims and counterclaims from specialists have left people tired of being told what to do.'* states The Waitrose Food and Drink report 2015, so *'...we self-regulate and cross-check facts with friends or trusted sources'*. But what they trust may not be trustworthy advice. People need help to understand the nature of science.

One of the things that the staggeringly successful Joe Wicks, author of 'Lean in 15'¹³ has tuned into is people are time pressured but everyone can spare 15 minutes. He restricts his nutrition advice on nutrients to a few paragraphs each, whereas healthcare professionals would provide at least a couple of pages if not a chapter. Whilst there is such a thing as being too brief, often we have all this knowledge we want to share but our job isn't to turn our patients or client into nutrition experts (that's who we are), it's to give them the information they need to make informed choices.

Dr Margaret McCartney's piece on clean eating in the BMJ¹⁴ contains salutary advice to dietitians: 'We need clean facts, and dietitians need to be much more visible in our post-facts world.' So come on, don't wait for someone else to do it. It's our time to come clean.

References: **1.** Garton L (2016). Hello. CN Focus; 8(1): 5. **2.** Spectator (2015). Not just a fad: the dangerous reality of 'clean eating'. Accessed online: www.spectator.co.uk/2015/08/why-clean-eating-is-worse-than-just-a-silly-fad (July 2016). **3.** BBC (2015). The Great British Bake Off. Accessed online: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0698ghb (July 2016). **4.** Fresh Partners Talent Management (2016). Tess Ward. Accessed online: www.fresh-partners.com/tess_ward.html **5.** Deliciously Ella (2016). Philosophy-About. Accessed online: <http://deliciouslyella.com/philosophy/about/> (August 2016). **6.** YouTube (2016). How I Became a Nutritional Health Coach. Accessed online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSIRgMylDqc **7.** HEMSLEY + HEMSLEY (2016). Homepage. Accessed online: www.hemsleyandhemsley.com (August 2016). **8.** BBC (2016). Clean Eating's Dirty Secrets. Accessed online: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p040430l (July 2016). **9.** Public Health England. SACN Carbohydrates and Health Report. Accessed online: www.gov.uk/government/publications/sacn-carbohydrates-and-health-report (July 2016). **10.** Angry Chef. Why so Angry? Accessed online: <http://angry-chef.com/> (July 2016). **11.** John Lewis. The Waitrose Food and Drink Report 2015. Accessed online: www.johnlewispartnership.co.uk/content/dam/cws/pdfs/Resources/the-waitrose-food-and-drink-report-2015.pdf/subassets/the-waitrose-food-and-drink-report-2015.pdf-3.pdf (July 2016). **12.** The Rooted Project. Accessed online: <http://therootedproject.co.uk/home/the-team-2/> (July 2016). **13.** Wicks J (2015). Lean in 15: 15 minute meals and workouts to keep you lean and healthy. Bluebird Pan Macmillan. **14.** McCartney M (2016). Clean eating and the cult of healthism. BMJ; 354: i4095.