

Mark Masselli (00:04)

Our guest is considered one of the most influential framers of modern food movement. She's Marion Nestle and now finds many of her ideas in favor in Washington and state capitals.

Marion Nestle, PhD (00:16)

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Margaret Flinter (00:34)

Dr. Marion Nestle holds a PhD in molecular biology, and as a nutritionist, she has advocated for tighter regulation of food additives and for lessening the food industry's influence in health policy.

Marion (00:45)

I'd like to see marketing restrictions on, what we're now calling ultra processed foods that requires some kind of federal intervention. If we want companies to stop marketing junk foods to kids, we've gotta have regulations about that.

Margaret (01:03)

This is Conversations on Healthcare.

Mark (01:16)

Dr. Nestle, welcome to Conversations on Healthcare.

Marion (01:19)

I'm glad to be here.

Mark (01:21)

You're highly respected as a nutritionist, public health advocate, and author. You've called for a complete change in our food system. So let's start by asking you for your take on HHS secretary Robert F. Kennedy, his Make America Healthy Again, efforts and his positions on what we eat.

Marion (01:42)

Well. He says he wants to make America healthy again, and oh, I'm totally for that. And he says he wants to, he's particularly concerned about obesity and chronic disease. He wants to get ultra processed foods out of schools, but mostly what he seems to be focused on is chemicals in the food supply. Now, I'm all forgetting, bad chemicals out of the food supply or questionable chemicals out of the food supply, like the color additives that are put into candy and cereals. But I don't think that goes nearly far enough if he's going to be serious about making America healthy again, from a food standpoint, he's going to have to do something about changing the food system to one that focuses on public health rather than corporate health. And he's going to have to do something about the food industries, inappropriate marketing, especially to children.

Margaret (02:47)

Well, when we, look at the argument that the president, and the secretary have made that the United States spends so much money, on health, and yet we have some of the worst outcomes, in the entire world in terms of health, what do you think about the solutions? You, you said they've, started, mostly perhaps looking at, additives and chemicals, but if you, if you had the magic lever yourself, where would you start? Where would you, what levers would you press, at HHS or elsewhere in federal government to begin to change the focus in a way that might actually make a difference for health in this country?

Marion (03:27)

Well, there are two big issues in nutrition. One is under nutrition or food insecurity, people not having enough money to buy the foods and picking foods that are cheapest because that's all they can afford. So I would start with universal basic income. Why not think big, universal, universal basic incomes so that people could afford to buy food and buy what they need and buy healthier foods and wouldn't be stuck with buying the cheapest foods of the highest calories. So that's one. The second would be, because the big other public health problem is obesity and its consequences. 75% of American adults are overweight or obese, and 30 to 40% of American children are overweight or obese. And that needs to be prevented for that. We need an agricultural system that's focused on public health, and that instead of growing food to be used as feed for animals, or even worse fuel for automobiles, we have an agricultural system that's producing food for people, that would increase the supply of

healthier foods, food, fruits, vegetables, grains, beans. It would decrease their cost and make those foods more available to the people who need them. Right now, only rich people can afford to eat helpfully, and there's something wrong with that picture. That's for starters.

Mark (05:04)

You know, Margaret, we read the New York Times, profile, on you. Congratulations. It said you met your moment, your 2002 book. Food Politics is seen as influential because it blamed America's obesity epidemic on the food industry. Can you tell our listeners more about why you say it is it's to blame?

Marion (05:25)

I would put that in a slightly different way. If, if you go online and ask, what influences people's food choices, you'll get, answers that include what their families eat, what they like, what's available in grocery stores, what's, you know, what their particular cultural and religious preferences are. Nobody ever talks about food industry marketing. And what I did in my book, food Politics in 2002 was what I thought was being very descriptive. I was describing a food marketing environment in which the food industry, which is not a social service agency and not a public health agency, but which is a business for business reasons, was selling the most highly profitable foods in the most places, in the most, in, in to the most people, in the largest possible portions. If we wanna change that system, we need to do something about calories. If we're going to do something about obesity, obesity is about calories in being higher than the calories that are expended. If we're going to do something about that, we have to create a food environment that encourages people to eat reasonable amounts of food. There's enormous ev amounts of evidence that between 1980 and 2000, the number of calories in the food supply increased, by seven or 800, and people's consumption of those calories increased by 300 or 400 or 500 a day, more than enough to account for rising levels of obesity. So how do we get people to eat fewer calories? That's a tough one. One thing you do is you start with an educational campaign. You, encourage or require food producers to produce foods in smaller amounts. I mean, if I had one explanation for the obesity epidemic, it would be that, portion sizes got larger, and if I had one thing to teach the American public about portion size, it's that larger portions have more calories. I wish it were intuitively obvious. So in a sense, I blame the food industry for, trying to sell more food, but they're just doing what their stockholders require. For example, I've heard food industry executives say, we wish we could stop marketing junk food to children, but our stockholders won't let us. And that's the problem. So if I had a magic wand to wand to wave, I would change our food investment system for, from one that prioritizes profits above all other considerations to one in which social values are highly valued as well. And there are B corporations that say they do that, but even they have to make an enormous amount of profit. It's very difficult for them to do that. And no large food corporations have become B corporations except for Danone, which doesn't behave very well.

Margaret (08:48)

Well, Marion, in the, the long arc of your career, and congratulations, for, powering Right on. We're, we're holding you up as a model of what we all wanna be doing when we're, at that, at that point.

Marion (09:00)

When we're a hundred years old, right?

Margaret (09:02)

Yeah. There you go. There you go. Good thing to aspire to, you've seen certainly a tremendous change in the social fabric and the social network, and a couple of major ones influence food, nutrition, calories and have an educational component. And many of these have been around starting the early days of our engagement in community health. Certainly the WIC program, certainly food stamps, certainly school lunches being widely, available and, you know, to some degree a natural foods movement. Have any of those, do you think been successful in getting at this fundamental issue, which does seem so simplistic about calories in and calories out, but wanting it to be healthy calories in, and good consumption of energy through exercise and so forth. What, what have you seen that gives you hope for, a change given it's not likely to come from things that lower stock prices around processed food. It's really gotta be a proactive one within the society.

Marion (10:03)

Well, I visited a lot of schools where the staff in the school believes that feeding children healthfully is the most important thing in the world that you can do. And in those schools, the food is edible and the kids are eating it. Certainly the regulations around school meals have greatly improved the nutritional quality. The big problem with school meals is the schools don't get nearly enough money to buy the foods that they, that many of the schools would like to be able to cook for the kids. And more money would help enormously. The, Obama administration was able to change the regulations and the research shows that for many children in America, the

foods they eat in school are the healthiest they eat. Which is, you know, I, and some schools do this really well. Some schools don't do this really well. A lot of it depends on who's in the school. What I've learned is that school food is person dependent, and it's not regulation dependent, it's person dependent. So that would be one thing. Certainly the food and assistance programs could be improved, that there's no question about, but the current administration wants to cut them. I don't think that cutting is going to help. It's not gonna make that situation better. I'd like to see marketing restrictions on, what we're now calling Ultrapro Foods that requires some kind of federal intervention. If we want companies to stop marketing junk food to kids, we've gotta have regulations about that. And those regulations would have to apply to social media as well, because there's all this evidence coming out that kids who use social media are exposed to dozens and dozens, if not hundreds of commercials for, or advertisements for unhealthy foods during the day. I mean, there are lots in d of different ways in which we could intervene. The question is whether this administration is planning to do that or not. And it's very difficult to tell because all that, Robert F. Kennedy Jr has announced is he has said he really wants the color additives out of the food supply. Great. I'm for that. Yep. He wants the, generally recognized as safe loophole closed, so that food companies are no longer responsible, for deciding whether the additives that are using, that they're using are, safe and effective. He wants some regulation of that. I'm in favor of both of those things.

Mark (12:57)

Let's take a look at both the regulations, this administration and things that you'd want, and see if it aligns with what at least one of the items that Secretary Kennedy, wants to ban, which is SNAP recipients from spending their support money on soft drinks and, and junk food. But the American Beverage Association says, so does soda is not what's driving obesity. So do calories, beverage calories overall have been coming down while BC rates have been, rising? What, what's your response to that?

Marion (13:31)

Well, they're not looking at who's consuming the sodas. They're very highly correlated. You know, when the food stamp program started in 1964, originally it was supposed to have sodas as sugar sweetened beverages as part as the category of foods that they could not use their food stamp benefits on. But there was an enormous amount of lobbying, not only from the, beverage association, but also from retailers who make a lot of money off of SNAP recipients to keep the sodas in there. I've been in favor of pilot projects to try to see what would happen if sodas were put into that category where you couldn't, where people couldn't use their electronic benefits on those sodas, but they could spend their own money on sodas if they wanted to. I've been in favor of pilot projects. Let's see what happens. Let's see how people feel about them. Because the arguments against doing that are poor people don't have very many choices, and this gives them choice. And it seems to me that's a reasonable argument, except that when I wrote my books, soda politics, I got letters from Snap recipients saying that they would welcome restrictions on sodas because it would keep them from buying so many. Mm-hmm. And sodas are an easy target because they're sugars in water and nothing else. They have no nutritional value. And there is an enormous amount of evidence that correlates drinking of large amounts of sugar sweetened beverages with obesity in the chronic diseases for which obesity is a risk factor. Nobody's worried about a little eight ounce can of soda. No nutritionist would be concerned. It's the two liter bottles, you know, it's the quart, it's the liter that everybody is worried about, because that's an enormous amount of sugar being dumped into metabolism. And metabolism can't handle it.

Margaret (15:46)

Well, it's easy, to imagine, Marion that the lobbyists descend, as they do around any issue. It's their right when, policies are being proposed. It's another, when policy is manipulated by the scientific establishment or by so-called science anyway, influencing these policy decisions. And you've written some wonderful, summaries of instances where, organizations funded science that lands as policy directors. Maybe share one of those, with our audience, just to pull that thread. It's, it's not just lobbyists, it's, it's using data

Marion (16:24)

Well, I should say I wrote a book about that, it's called Unsavory Truth, how the Food Industry Skews the Science of What We Eat. There's a, a tremendous amount of research that demonstrates that industry funding of science influences the outcome of that, of the, of, of that research. And, when I was working on my book Soda Politics, I was particularly interested in soda industry funding. But while I was working on that, I was also collecting examples of industry funding funded research. And I think I collected 168, examples of industry funded research over a year and 158 of those, I'm not sure of the exact numbers anymore, but I think 158 of them or something like that, had results that favored the sponsors outcome. Food companies are not gonna sponsor research unless it has a very high likelihood of giving them the kind of answers that the industry is looking for. And the food industry is looking for evidence that specific foods make people healthier, make them

make kids smarter, and that they certainly don't cause any harm. And by this time, there's hardly a food or food product that I can think of that doesn't have a trade association behind it that's funding research. And that research, what the evidence shows is that the place where the influence most shows up is in the way the research question is framed or in the way the results are interpreted. And I get letters from food trade associations all the time saying, we're looking for studies for proposals, for studies that will demonstrate the benefits of our product for heart disease, for cancer prevention, for cognition in children, for, you know, anything that you can think of. They're not going to fund studies that don't have a good chance of showing that. So I am, I think that, industry funded research should be published in its own journal.

Mark (18:41)

Is the food industry monolithic? And I'm trying to, connect the dots between what I've heard is true in Europe in terms of less, chemicals in the food, or, is there a best practice happening somewhere in the globe around how they're regulating, what the food industry can do? And maybe you could, shine a light on that for us.

Marion (19:05)

Well, certainly in Europe, they have, forbidden. Well, they haven't actually forbidden. What they do is they require the color additives that we use in the United States, the, petroleum-based dyes, they require those to have warning labels. And that was all it took to get the food companies using those dyes to stop using it. Hmm. So that's one thing. Latin America, particularly starting in Chile and now Brazil, Peru, Mexico, many other countries in Latin America have warning labels on ultra processed food products or products that are high in sugar, salt, fat or calories, saturated fat calories, sometimes artificial sweeteners and caffeine. And you go into a supermarket in Mexico, it's an astounding experience because these big black warning labels are over half the products in the store. And the advantage of the warning labels is that even people who can't read don't know what they, they, they, even if they can't read, they know what the warning labels are. And even little kids know what those warning labels are, and they can say to their parents, no, let's not buy that. We're not allowed to take that to school because some of the countries have rules that you, that those products cannot be used in schools. So they're way ahead of us in, in that way. I don't see that happening in the United States, at least not for the next several years. But it's something to think about.

Margaret (20:45)

Well, there has been some Progress, I think, in some of the states, I think, California, right First state to ban four different kinds of food additives, West Virginia, first state to ban artificial dyes. That was, interesting. And we haven't seen anybody do anything around the supersizing. And it seems like that one is fraught with the issues, though.

Marion (21:08)

Well, that's calories. See, that's where the, that's where the calories come in. And once you start doing that, then you're hitting the food industry where it hurts the color additives. They're already got rid of the color additives in Europe and Australia and New Zealand and places like that. They can get rid of the color additives. And RFK Junior has made it very clear that he expects them to, and he expects them to get rid of the color additives right away. I think they will.

Margaret (21:37)

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. But the super sizing is where the calories, that, that's where the rubber meets the road for profits.

Marion (21:44)

That's where you're hitting the food industry, where it's going to hurt a lot. Because remember, the purpose of a, of a business is to make more money, not less. It's to sell more food, not less anything that's likely to reduce, food company sales or profits is something that they feel obliged. They have a fiduciary responsibility to oppose under the current system. And food companies are under tremendous pressure these days from concerns about ultra processed foods. What's happening with people who are taking GLP one drugs for obesity who turn out not to wanna be eating junk food. Junk foods are the most profitable foods in the supermarket.

Mark (22:34)

Let me just pull, pick up on the, on the food industry and its desire to maximize its profit and think, I'm looking over your right shoulder. Is it possible I'm seeing a cereal box? And maybe tell, tell us a little more about your thoughts about the marketing strategy, because to make more profits, you really need to have a, a very engaged in robust marketing campaign. So why, why do you collect cereal boxes?

Marion (23:00)

Well, 'cause my next book is about cereal marketing, and I'm working on it, and I'll just grab this. I bought this one from Kellogg. This is not a real cereal box. It's a joke. It's not real. Yes. But I thought I had to have it.

Margaret (23:20)

That is wonderful.

Marion (23:22)

Quite love it. The, you know, cereal companies change the box design several times a year. The big companies do. And so they are able to respond to the latest trends in or fads in food. And you can respond very, very quickly. And I've been collecting cereal boxes for about 20 years now and have quite a collection. It turns out the NYU library has quite a collection and, we're doing a very tight, I have a co-author and she and I are doing a very tight deconstruction of cereal boxes, and it's really about how they market. Every single element of that book of that box is designed for marketing or it's something that has to be there.

Margaret (24:09)

Mm-hmm. So interesting. You know, we've talked a lot about the food, and eating, but we haven't said anything about the cooking end of it or the growing end of it, and would really welcome, your thoughts on a community level, because all problems do not get solved in Washington. Thoughts on the community gardening movement. Food is medicine. I dare I say it would date me so much, but home ec, you know, teaching somebody how to actually cook as part of your school, curriculum which I think has evolved into a different name and more available to, all people, not just, girls. But what are your thoughts about some of these other pathways in that kind of subvert the supermarket aisle?

Marion (24:52)

Well, I'm very interested in, in nutrition for kids and, 'cause that's really what I worry about. And I've been to loads of schools that have school gardens, and let me tell you, they're transformative. Mm-hmm. It's absolutely astounding to watch teenage boys in Harlem where I went to one, go out and pick lettuce and vegetables and put together a salad and make the dressing and serve it and eat it and ask for more because it's so delicious to them. It's totally transformative in kids' relationships to food. Many kids are completely unfamiliar with fruits and vegetables. They haven't seen them grown, they've never been on a farm. And there's something about growing your own food that's absolutely thrilling. It's so much fun. And the schools that are doing that are performing an enormous public service. When Alice Waters first started talking about school gardens, everybody thought she was crazy, right? But now, there are thousands of schools, literally, that have these things, and they're astonishing to watch. And schools in which there are, there's an opportunity to teach about food where the food is being cooked from scratch are very, very different experiences than in schools that are using packaged foods because they don't have kitchens or because they just absolutely do not have enough money to buy what they need. So I think school food is hugely important. I'm greatly in favor of everybody learning how to grow foods and everybody learning how to cook. Cooking is really fun. You get to eat it afterwards. It's really fun.

Mark (26:40)

Well, you know, you also authored the book *Why Calories Count*, and you, you're skeptical of our ability to count calories we eat. Maybe talk a little bit about, that struggle that people have, versus just understanding what a good meal is and eating the right portions and not worrying about counting calories, because it seems to be a very, problematic focus.

Marion (27:05)

Oh, it's impossible. You can't tell by looking at a food how many calories it has. And the only way that you can tell if you're eating the right amount is by weighing yourself regularly on a scale. If your weight is going up, you're eating too much, period. End of story. Or you're not burning enough, right? I mean, it's, Oh, you're eating. It's very, very, very, very, very few people can do enough. Only elite athletes or people who are exercising for many, many, many hours a day, will be burning off enough calories to make a difference. Because I, I mean, the rule of thumb I use is it takes about a hundred calories to walk or run off a mile. So if you have a two or 300 calories soft drink, you've gotta walk or run three miles to work it off. A lot of people don't do that or can't do that. So it really has to do with the food quantity. For most people, the amount they're eating is more important. And you know, I remember when I was young and when my kids were young, we didn't eat between meals. Here's a rule. The more times a day you eat, the more calories you take in. The larger the portions, the more calories you take in. We weren't allowed to eat between meals. And if we got hungry, we got hungry, you can wait for an hour. Many, the, the social norms have changed. So the idea that somebody will go for more than two hours without eating is, seems kind of ridiculous to people right now, but it didn't used to be that way. And

kids were thinner. You look at school pictures from 30 or 40 years ago. You look at school pictures now, there's a really, really big difference. So people are eating too much. And how do you get people to eat less really hard? That's why these GLP one drugs are so affected. They're getting people to eat less. So you have to change the food environment to a food environment that promotes eating more healthfully. People rarely pig out on salads. So one idea would be don't eat ultra processed foods or eat ultra processed foods in very, very small amounts, and, you know, use them as occasional treats. That shouldn't be what everybody's eating all the time. And portion sizes have expanded enormously. Bagels and muffins used to be what are now called mini bagels and mini muffins and pizzas have doubled or tripled in size.

Margaret (29:51)

Dr. Marion Nestle, we want to thank you so much for joining us today. We've looked forward to this interview. We thank you for your research, your education, your advocacy and all that you've, contributed to this country. And just a reminder, to our audience, we want you to be sure to subscribe to our videos on YouTube, find us on Facebook and x. And please share your thoughts and commentary about this program, as well as our other programs. Take care and be well.

(30:21)

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