

An Interview with Pam Popper, Ph.D., N.D.

by Mark Huberman

Pam Popper, Ph.D., N.D. is a naturopath, an internationally recognized expert on nutrition, medicine and health, and the Executive Director of Wellness Forum Health, offering educational programs to both consumers and providers that facilitate informed medical decision-making, diet and lifestyle intervention, and improved long-term health outcomes. Dr. Popper serves on the Physicians Steering Committee and the President's Board for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, and is a lobbyist and public policy expert, testifying in front of legislative committees on numerous occasions. Dr. Popper served as part of Dr. T. Colin Campbell's teaching team at eCornell, and has been featured in many widely distributed documentaries, including *Forks Over Knives*. She is one of the co-authors of the film's companion book, which was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 66 weeks. Her most recent book is *Food Over Medicine: The Conversation That Could Save Your Life*.



Many folks who adopt a whole-food, plant-based diet only do so following a health crisis that causes them to question the standard American diet. Was that the case for you?

Well, that's where I am very, very lucky because that was not the case for me. However, the path that I was heading on, before this intervened in my life, was one where sooner or later, certainly by the age that I am now, it would have been catastrophic from a health perspective given a family history of poor health.

What happened to me was a little unusual. I grew up not having much consciousness about health. I was athletic and worked as a professional dancer for a while, so being thin was important. However, as I have long since learned, being thin is different than being healthy. Into adulthood I ate what I wanted. What I really loved was cookies and cheese, and I also smoked cigarettes. Then one day I found an article in a magazine that discussed the connection between diet and health and it really caught my attention. That led me to read a book by John McDougal, M.D., which made crystal clear the impact of diet on health, and the strong warning about what was going to happen to me if I didn't make a right turn and do something different!

How old were you when you made this lifestyle change?

“Something is seriously wrong when you're 38 years old and you're tired all the time.”

I was 38, and that's about the time when most people start falling apart as a result of their lifelong bad habits.

Is that what Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, Jr. refers to when he says, “You start running out of the warranty period” that most of us are granted?

Yes, exactly. And at 38 years old I was chubby, probably 30 pounds heavier than I am now, and I had dark circles under my eyes. I didn't look healthy and I actually didn't feel good. I find it interesting now to look back on that time and realize that all the people I knew in my age range were also a little chubby and they didn't feel good either; but that was sort of the norm. I didn't really think there was anything wrong, but I know now that something is seriously wrong when you're 38 years old and you're tired all the time.

For most people, even when the light finally goes on that their lifestyle has to change, they don't just do so cold turkey. It's usually a journey and not a destination. What about for you?

I adopted a vegetarian diet right away, but remember, this was 22 years ago when it was much more challenging. And the reason I point that out is that today, when someone makes this change, you've got all kinds of online

resources. You can find tens of thousands of recipes online. None of that was available when I started out. Although I became a vegetarian, I continued to eat fish; what I was really doing was eating the health food store version of the vegan or vegetarian diet. So I found myself eating “baked” potato chips, “fruit-sweetened” cookies, and fake hot dogs and cheese.

This is what my late, great mother used to call “health food/junk food.”

That’s exactly what it was. I mean, it was probably less cancer-promoting than what I was doing before, but it certainly wasn’t going to fix what was wrong with me. So through trial and error, I finally realized that this can’t be what everybody has in mind. And I went back to the McDougall cookbook and discovered some of the wonderful recipes offered by his wife, Mary McDougall. I looked at Mary’s recipes and thought, “I’m not really eating anything like this; I need to go buy beans and whole foods!” Once I got it right, through trial and error, I just stopped eating fish and I was on board. I guess you could say I was sort of the “accidental vegan.” For me, becoming vegan was not a real conscious thing; one day I just woke up and realized that I hadn’t had any fish for a couple of months, and I thought, “I don’t really miss it, so I think I’m just not going to do that either.”

What was your line of work when you underwent your diet transformation?

I was in the sales training business, and my job was teaching people how to sell products. The job required a lot of traveling, and I have since learned that if you have bad habits, they get a lot worse when you travel and that’s certainly what happened to me. However, that sales training background came in handy when I finally started a business that revolved around nutrition.

What led you to shift careers?

I decided I wanted more training in this lifestyle, but the options were limited. I really didn’t want to do traditional dietetics training, and the other nutrition programs were not that great since they were not as scientifically grounded as I would’ve liked them to be. So, I went to school and earned a Master’s degree and Ph.D. in nutrition and took a lot of supplemental classes elsewhere so that I would be competent. After I turned in my dissertation, I felt I was really done with school. However, there was a

naturopathy school here in Columbus, Ohio and the owner said, “You know, Pam, if you don’t do this naturopathy degree now you’ll never do it, because you’ll enjoy being out of school.” He talked me into it and I subsequently obtained my N.D. degree.

It strikes me that you have come a long way in our health movement in a relatively short time. You’ve been featured in many of the groundbreaking documentaries on the benefits of a plant-based diet, including *Forks Over Knives* and *Food Choices*. Tell me how this happened.

First of all, I consider myself a very, very fortunate person since you can’t just go looking for these kinds of opportunities. What I especially love about the documentaries—and there are more of them coming out all the time

because there is a very big appetite for this type of information—is that they spread the word really quickly. *Food Choices* came out in September of 2016 and every day I get emails from people in India, Russia, Ireland, and literally all over the world who are watching this film. It’s been translated into 25 different languages and is really making people want to change. I’ve been very fortunate to be included in these documentaries and I’m just very grateful that they are making the difference that they’re making. Every one that comes out seems to add another component and covers another aspect of this topic that we all know is so very, very important.



“The film really showed people the potential for healing their own bodies even if they were really sick.”

What do you think it was about *Forks Over Knives* that was so groundbreaking?

The content. You’ve got two primary characters, Dr. T. Colin Campbell and Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, Jr., who love what they do, love research and had the good fortune to become professional colleagues. The film depicts how each carefully documented all of their information, and struck up a friendship that furthered both of their research and health improvement goals. The film further shined a spotlight on a number of other wonderful doctors who love what they do and followed their efforts in getting their sick patients well.

You know, there’s not a lot of happy stuff in the theaters these days, and this is one happy story. When the film came out I remember receiving a lot of the emails from people saying, “Oh my gosh, I wish I’d had this information earlier, because my father died of diabetes or my mother died of a heart attack.” The film really showed people the potential for healing their own bodies even if they were really

sick. It was an inspiring story, and we need more inspiration in the world today.

It also has a great title, right?

Absolutely. And by the way, just as an FYI, it was like the twentieth title of the film—but the title really does say it all.

In addition to being a well-told story, do you think that it was the credibility of T. Colin Campbell and Caldwell Esselstyn, Jr. that gave authority and credibility to this film?

No question. The producer, Brian Wendel, is a very, very smart man. He had 161,000 minutes of film but made the film only 96 minutes long. One of my jobs on the film was to do the research and make sure what we were saying was scientifically unassailable, which it was. As you have probably observed, no one has really challenged the film's content.

In addition to appearing in documentaries, I see you have also become an author in your own right. Tell me about the books you've written.

I was one of the contributing authors to the *Forks Over Knives* companion book and then I signed on with BenBella Books for *Food Over Medicine*, which came out three years ago and has done very well. I was also hired to be one of the co-authors of the *Food Choices* companion book, which I just finished a couple of days ago. I find it amazing that every time I look around and see the number of books that I'm selling—and that we're selling as a group in this health movement—it just tells you there's an insatiable appetite out there for knowledge.

Are you also part of Dr. Campbell's online nutrition course?

I was for about five or six years but not now. It's a marvelous program that he's put together and one of the great things about it is that his teaching extends to a lot of health professionals, and that is the secret to fixing this problem. Getting more health professionals onboard is the way things have to be in the future. We've got to treat people with diet.

They also offer one of the classiest online newsletters that is out there.

Everything Colin Campbell does is amazing. When you think about everything he's done, from the early research that led to *The China Study* to the over 300 papers



Dr. Popper promotes her new book *Food Over Medicine* with Chef Del Sroufe, author of the New York Times Bestseller *Forks Over Knives: The Cookbook*.

that he's published, I mean the guy is an overachiever on steroids!

I see that you are also a lobbyist and public policy expert with a particular interest in changing laws that interfere with a patient's right to choose their healthcare, health provider and method of care. Are you actually a registered lobbyist in Ohio and/or nationally?

Yes, and I've worked on issues in nearly every state and now at the federal level. I've worked on several cases and laws that prevent parents from choosing the treatments that they want for their children, something I find to be an appalling situation. I'm a firm believer that parents should have authority over their children, and in particular with things like cancer treatments. A lot of

cancer treatments just don't work; so not wanting to subject a five-year-old to a treatment that will most certainly kill the child is not an outrageous thing. Yet, kids are taken away from their parents every day in this country over that type of thing.

What I spend most of my time on these days are issues concerning licensure of healthcare professionals. As you know, this is a very political area and one where medical doctors like to control the healthcare business and dietitians like to control the nutrition business. I probably wouldn't mind that if they were well-trained; and while some certainly are, many are not, and those institutions try to make it so nobody else can talk about diet and health. The result is they end up controlling the message that people get about healthcare, which is, primarily: you must take these tests, buy these drugs, have these procedures, and eat a diet that is in accordance with the USDA recommendations.

We know where all this leads, and it's not to better health. That's what *Forks Over Knives* was all about. You remember Joey Aucoin, who was taking eight drugs and two to three shots a day. He wasn't getting any better, he was getting worse. I'm sure he talked to a dietitian about his diet but wasn't being advised to eat a diet to heal his body. At one time it was actually a criminal offense to talk about nutrition if you weren't a dietitian in some states and Ohio used to be one of them. I personally ended up in a very long battle here that went on for five years and cost well over a hundred thousand dollars. I won my case and decided I have to do something about this, because this affects everybody. If you control the messenger, you will control the message, and that's really what it's all about.

State legislatures have worked with professional groups to make sure they have a monopoly over practice, so people end up only getting one side or one story line about how to help themselves with their health-related issues. It's a complicated issue but it's a very important one.

One of the most complicated issues facing parents today is the seemingly never-ending number of new requirements for immunizations of their children. Do you support a parent's right to decline immunizations?

Absolutely, and I'll tell you why. I'm not anti-immunization, I'm not anti-drug companies, and I don't oppose the use of all drugs. In fact, one overarching statement that I'll make, that I think is very important, is that (with a handful of exceptions) most of what we do in healthcare has some usefulness to a particular group of people. But you can't make billions of dollars using treatments, drugs, and procedures where only a handful of people will actually benefit from them. The money is in making sure everybody does it, takes it, or has it.

Vaccines have significant side effects for particular groups of people, but this is never disclosed to parents. My practice specialty here in Columbus is based on informed medical decision-making, and that is because what I hear in this office every single day is: "If I'd known then what I know now, I never would have done..." Well, that's what happens with vaccinations. Most kids do not have negative reactions, immediately anyway. But for some kids there are horrible consequences like autism, encephalopathy, and death to name just a few.

In the 1980s, makers of vaccines approached the United States government and said, "We're not going to make these vaccines anymore unless you hold us harmless from the damages that our products cause." The Feds agreed to it and created a vaccine damage compensation fund. You'll be astounded when I tell you that this fund has paid out over \$3.2 billion dollars! And yet the same Feds tell us that there is no problem with using these vaccines. I think \$3.2 billion dollars is a lot of money to spend for a problem that doesn't exist.

In addition, almost nobody knows about the court that adjudicates these claims, whose process has the most limited statute of limitations of any court proceeding in the country. In fact, I've never met anyone who knew that they could have made a claim to this court until long after the statute had expired. I think that if people knew about the availability of compensation, the amount of money paid out would probably be closer to the hundreds of billions of dollars. If I had more money, I'd take out full-page ads in the *New York Times* just to notify people that they could

seek this compensation.

As a researcher and healthcare professional, are you concerned about the long-term impacts on the immune system due to all of these immunizations?

Absolutely. And the worst part about it is we don't know. All of this was done without adequate knowledge and testing. And that, by the way, is how things happen with the drug companies. Here's something that will astound you. Congress also passed something called the PDUFA Act in response to a complaint by the drug companies that drugs weren't being approved fast enough. The PDUFA Act allows for drug companies to fund their review of their products at the FDA. Talk about a cozy arrangement! Last year, by the end of October, the drug companies had given \$781 million dollars to the FDA in application fees, and as a result they are funding better than half of the FDA's budget. The FDA has a whole lot of people in their building who would not have jobs if the drug companies weren't paying for them.

So here is what I'm getting at: The approval rate for new drugs and vaccines in the last couple of years has hit

"The approval rate for new drugs and vaccines in the last couple of years has hit 96%."

96%. I say the following only half kidding, but the way things are going, the drug companies are just going to send an email to the FDA saying, "We're going to be introducing a new drug next year. No sense in going through the approval process, we know you'll approve it anyway. We'll probably kill a few people and hurt a few people, but

we just wanted to give you a heads up that that's what's going to happen."

Many of the doctors in the Natural Hygiene Movement who were founders of the NHA, took the view that most of the "contagious diseases" that children experience are actually constructive physiological events. Meaning that if you contract a condition like the mumps, your natural antibodies are stimulated and you will never get the mumps again because you have developed natural immunity. Were they right, and is just the opposite approach being taken by moderate medicine today?

Yes, exactly. And we have outbreaks of almost all of these diseases we're vaccinating for, and the industry and the government's dirty little secret is that most of the people who are getting these diseases are vaccinated. Furthermore, we're having outbreaks in older children and even adults.

There was a mumps outbreak in Iowa several years ago and it was almost all people in their 30s and 40s. No one wants to get the mumps when you're 35 years old. You want to get the mumps when you're nine. In addition to

all the other things that are wrong, the vaccines really don't confer life-time immunity like you would get from actually contracting the disease.

The other thing that I'll mention, and this is an overlooked part of all of this, but it's well documented in the medical journals, is that the death rate from infectious disease had fallen precipitously before vaccinations were introduced. The vaccine industry has taken credit for that, but between cleaning up the water supply and improved sanitation in many different areas, people were simply not dying of infectious diseases the way that they were 100 years ago.

For example, before the introduction of the measles vaccine, the death rate from measles was around 150 in the whole country. I don't want to minimize these 150 deaths, but estimates now show that we have a *couple of million* vaccine-injured people in this country; that's a lot of injured folks to prevent 150 deaths per year.

You talked about the FDA and some of your efforts to challenge their actions, but I believe you have also testified before the USDA in reference to their national dietary guidelines. Where do they get them right and where are they way off?

Where they are getting them right is that they are increasingly acknowledging (although sometimes it's like dragging them kicking and screaming) that you can get protein from sources other than animal foods and that you can eat foods other than dairy for calcium. Another positive step is that they finally got rid of that ridiculous pyramid with all the stripes. It's important to remember that nobody even knew what it meant. They have now replaced it with a plate that resembles the one that the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) uses, and I think that was the result of PCRM suing them to get them to make statements about nutrition that people could understand.

But where they're still getting it wrong is that, in an effort to not offend any agricultural group (because that's really the audience they serve), they don't come out and say, "Eating less animal food is a good idea." Instead, they'll say something like, "You know, you can get all your nutrients from a vegetarian or vegan diet plan." They don't discourage it, but they certainly don't say anything that would make somebody think: "Well, the government



Dr. Neal Barnard with Dr. Popper

"The death rate from infectious disease had fallen precipitously before vaccinations were introduced."

has been made to do that, the food companies and agricultural organizations scream like mad cows, so they get their way.

One of my favorite dietitians, Jeff Novick, always maintains that some of the greatest deceptions for consumers are product labels. Buyers think they are making good choices when they see products that claim to be "fat free," "sugar free," or "calorie free" but that it's all a gag. Is that how you see it as well?

Oh, absolutely. My proposal that I wrote about in my book, *Food Over Medicine*, would be to simply say to food manufacturers, "Here's what you're allowed to do": On the front of the package you can say things that are subjective about your product, like "easy to make," "kids love it," or "delicious," but you can't make any health claims. And on the back of the package, the label has to clearly show what the ingredients are in plain terms that people can understand.

This approach would prohibit the current "divide and conquer" ridiculousness where you have six kinds of sugar but you sprinkle them throughout the ingredients list. I would also get rid of the silly nutrition label that makes people think that a product has a certain amount of some vitamin, like Vitamin A, and therefore it makes it a good product.

If we adopted this approach, thousands of government employees could be eliminated since they wouldn't have to be sitting at their desks reviewing all this stuff and trolling the Internet looking for violators and filing actions against these companies. It is such a colossal waste of time in order to allow people to make false statements about the products they're trying to sell.

thinks this is a good idea, so maybe I'll try it."

Perhaps the most positive thing they are finally doing is telling people to eat more foods like fruit and vegetables. And when it comes to animal foods they'll say things like "Eat less saturated fat and eat less cholesterol." Dr. Neal Barnard, the founder of PCRM, has written about this a lot. He states, "People don't go to the grocery store and buy cholesterol and saturated fat. They go to the grocery store and they buy steak and beef and pork chops, and that's what they should really be telling people to eat less of." But every time an attempt

How powerful a tool do you find diet and lifestyle in preventing and reversing most of the chronic diseases that people experience like heart disease, hypertension and diabetes?

I can say with a great deal of assurance that no one is going to get better unless they change their diet—and I mean that. There's a difference between *feeling* better and *getting* better. You can take a drug and feel better. You can take a drug and pretend like you don't have the condition that you have. But while you're drugged you get worse, which is why people have to take more drugs.

If you really want to address your problems, you need to get to the causes of those problems, and the only path to better health is to eat an optimal diet, exercise, and practice healthy habits. Unfortunately, people who come to my program are not always looking for that type of advice. I think one of the problems we have, in addition to doctors not knowing about this, is that many of the patients who are going to see them want “magic pill” formulas for what's wrong with them and that's where drugs become so appealing. Because your headaches, or whatever is wrong with you, magically seem to disappear two hours after you put the tablet in your mouth, you think you are better.

But it really doesn't make your headache disappear, does it?

It doesn't really. For example, if I drive home tonight and the oil light comes on in my car, there are two ways I can respond to it. One is to pull over to the side of the road, pop the hood and disconnect the fuse that lights up the lamp, and just keep driving. Well, we know the inevitable end of that story: the engine blows up. Or, I can take the car to the dealer, state that something is clearly wrong, check it out and then fix whatever is actually the problem. Maybe it needs more oil because it has a leak in the oil tank. Something has to be fixed. Unfortunately, people are trained to look for symptom suppression, which is confused with healing.

How do you capsule the Pam Popper nutrition program?

I tell people their main food groups are going to be fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes. Also that they have to get rid of the dairy and oil. Their diet should also be very low fat but high fiber. At our Center (Wellness Forum Health), we are very prescriptive about the directions. You see a lot of people out there talking about “eat more of this and less of that,” but nobody knows what “more and less” means. In our society, we are all firm believers in “moderation,” but nobody knows what that means.

One important issue is high-fat plant foods. You can eat a lot of high-fat plant foods, such as coconuts, avoca-

dos, nuts, and unless you have severe advanced cardiovascular disease, you don't have to give those foods up. But at the same time, you don't want to go out of your way to eat those either. Keep in mind that a cup of avocado has 21 grams of fat. This doesn't mean you should never eat avocado, but I could be a 300-pound vegan if I just let myself load up on foods like that.

Speaking of being vegan, do you subscribe to Alan Goldhamer's Vegan SOS-free diet, a plant-based diet with no added salt, oil, or sugar?

For some people, yes. However, I also think we have to consider that if we want this to take hold and really gain traction in the marketplace, we have to recognize that some people who are not deathly ill need enticing into adopting a diet like this. To achieve that, I think we sometimes have to make different recommendations to different people. For some people, they probably don't have the luxury of ever letting food that isn't optimal touch their lips again. Other people may roll their eyes and postpone making changes until they're half dead; but that would be a serious failure, in my book.

So the way that we handle it is let's put the people who have cancer and advanced coronary artery disease in one category and then let's talk to the rest of the population. I think if you use prescriptive communication you can make arrangements for these people to buy in and be happy about it, while making enough change to see improvements in their health and lower their risk of disease.

We have a food pyramid that actually makes sense for this purpose. At the very tip of the pyramid, you can hardly read the print and that's where the treats are. And what this means is that Christmas is a good day for cookies; Valentine's Day is a good day for chocolate; and your birthday is a good day for a piece of cake. These aren't terrible ideas so long as they do not become the daily fare. Unfortunately, what most people are doing is treating themselves with these foods every day. The bottom line is we have to be careful that we're not discouraging people who aren't sick from adopting this diet.

What is your reaction to the blizzard of television advertising extolling the benefits of so many different drugs but with the caution of so many side effects? It has always seemed so strange to me that it encourages patients to tell their doctors what they need rather than the doctors telling the patients what they need.

You are right. You can't watch an hour of television without seeing at least a couple of ads. The pharmaceutical companies are spending a fortune on this because it works.

“In our society, we are all firm believers in ‘moderation,’ but nobody knows what that means.”

People actually do call their doctors and say, "I think I have social anxiety disorder. Can you prescribe Paxil for me?" I think it's disgraceful. The U.S. and New Zealand are the only two countries on the planet that permit this type of thing, and if I had my way, that advertising wouldn't be there anymore.

The other insidious effect is that because the drug companies spend so much money on advertising, people like Alan Goldhamer, John McDougall and I are not guests on talk shows and at venues that would get the word out faster, because you can't upset the drug companies. A researcher friend of mine made an excellent documentary on this subject that we showed at one of our conferences here in Columbus. It was supposed to be shown on television until the drug companies got wind of it. They said, "We'll pull out," so it never got shown.

In watching *Food Choices*, I seem to recall a segment about the downside or maybe even the dark side of the current promotion of grass-fed beef and free-range chickens. The point being made is that such practices may actually have a worse environmental footprint than the current practice and provide a rationale for supporting bad food choices. Do you share that concern?

Well, here's the problem. So much of what we do in nutrition is what I call "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." This isn't about eating better chicken or better beef, it's about ratcheting it down and getting rid of it. If you look at the Okinawans, for example, 1% of their diet is fish and another 3 or 4% is other animal foods. And because so much of their diet is sweet potatoes and plants, they could eliminate the meat and it wouldn't make any difference. So to suggest that if you're eating animal foods three times a day, but buy grass fed beef and free range whatever, that this is going to solve your problem, is absolutely ridiculous.

It is also true that it takes even more land for grass-fed beef and free-range chickens. Clearly, a major environmental problem the world is currently facing is that we're clearing land, particularly in the rain forest, for the raising of animals for slaughter, and that is completely unsustainable. So if you want to destroy the planet faster, everybody



Dr. Pam Popper (center) with staff members of the Barnard Medical Center in Washington D.C.

“So much of what we do in nutrition is what I call ‘rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.’”

support our bad habits.” Is he right?

Absolutely. But you know something, I don't want to hold people *not* responsible for their choices because they *are* responsible for their choices. But having said that, we have an awful lot of people with very impressive initials after their names speaking with a great deal of authority telling people that it's okay to do these things. That's one of the reasons why I have fought so hard to change licensure laws, because as long as everyone who isn't adhering to the party line about what we're supposed to eat, isn't allowed to talk about it without fear of criminal prosecution, people will continue to get the wrong idea, particularly from TV advertising.

We can't do a whole lot about some of it because we live in a free country. But allowing more people to speak up and not necessarily having one authoritarian point of view from one group would be very helpful.

We've talked a lot about diet, but what about other facets of a healthy lifestyle. Do you believe that practices like exercise, yoga and meditation play valuable roles?

Exercise certainly. And the reason I say that is because humans are built to move. If you eat a perfect diet, never let a bad morsel touch your lips but sit long enough, you're going to have health problems. One of them is bone deterioration. Osteoblasts and osteoclasts remodel bone but this requires weight-bearing movement in order to stimulate that process. So you have to exercise.

And one of the important reasons for doing exercise, particularly for people in our age group, is that it's the ticket to remaining independent for the rest of your life. The leading reason why people end up in nursing homes is they're too frail to live on their own. The goal is to be strong and sturdy and have coordination and balance;

should maintain the same eating habits but go for "better" animal foods that take up more land to produce. The bottom line is that everybody's avoiding the elephant in the room, which is that diets have to change if we expect to live on this planet for generations to come.

I recently heard Dr. Doug Lisle, co-author of *The Pleasure Trap*, say, "We're always looking for excuses to

those things do not happen from sitting. They happen from exercise and keeping ourselves strong.

Now, some people reading this interview have probably reached the point where they realize that they have to work a whole lot harder at it as they get older than they did when they were younger and impervious to the ravages of aging. But if you want to be living on your own when you're 95, you'd better be keeping your body strong and sturdy for a good long time.

What about meditation; do you think it plays a valuable role?

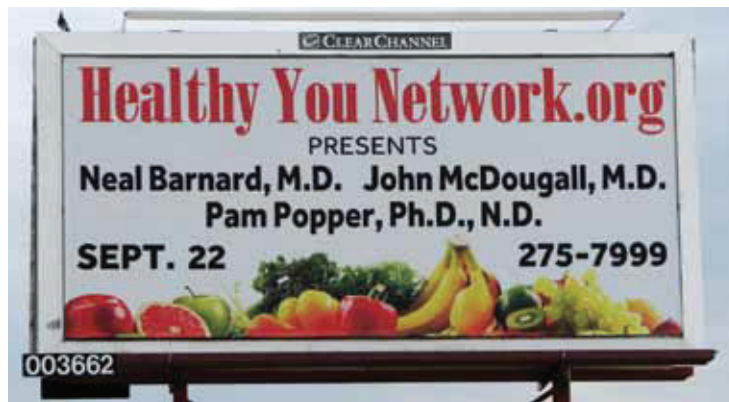
I think it can and I think that one of the things we could do to make it more acceptable to people is to show them how to do it in ways that work for them. In other words, some people have difficulties just sitting down and clearing their head. But yoga can be meditative. There are a lot of different ways to meditate. The Buddhists do it with chanting and that's very effective. I think people need to learn to settle themselves down and focus and be present, and that's what's lacking.

Do you think Simon and Garfunkel were on to something years back when they so famously sang, "Slow down, you move too fast. You've got to make the moment last!"

Absolutely. I think the older you get the less you want things to slide by. I'm a lot more mentally present now than I was 10 years ago. It's not like I feel my mortality, it's just that I'm planning to live to be a hundred! I have learned to appreciate things a whole lot more. I want to pay attention to everything that's happening because I understand its importance. I don't think I had any clue about this when I was 20. What I'd really like to do is be 60 and go back and be 20 again with all the knowledge that I possess now. Unfortunately, that's not an option.

I'm told that you often refer your members with chronic illnesses to Dr. Alan Goldhamer's TrueNorth Health Center for water fasting. Have you ever stayed there?

A few years ago I had the opportunity to stay there for a week, and I enjoyed it very, very much. I have been sending people there for a long time and they were all ecstatic about the experience. Frankly, I have a lot of folks in my files



Billboard announcing an all-star line-up for Healthy You Network's Tucson, Arizona conference in 2014

"I have a lot of folks in my files that wouldn't be alive today if they hadn't fasted at TrueNorth."

that wouldn't be alive today if they hadn't fasted at TrueNorth. It's a fabulous resource and we need to have one like it in every city. I'm hoping someday that will happen.

Tell me about your organization.

Wellness Forum Health just celebrated its twentieth anniversary. When I started it, I really don't think I had much of

a plan. I wanted to tell other people what I knew, and it just grew and grew. Basically, we specialize in informed medical decision-making. We start with the premise that everybody has the right to know the risks and benefits presented to them in an objective, unbiased way about every diet, supplement, test, drug, and procedure they are considering before making a decision about it. We have the

largest collection of decision tools in the world. We have 2,500 articles and 3,500 hours of programming. Interestingly enough, when people get that full disclosure of all of the options and risks/benefits, they become incredibly interested in diet and lifestyle change. That's because when you see the lack of efficacy of so much of what is done in medicine, you can become very interested in

changing your habits. We help these people adopt optimal diet and lifestyle habits.

What kind of consultations do you offer?

People come here for information, and one of the things that we tell them is that we don't have a horse in this race. We're not here to talk you into or out of anything. We are here to give you information and then you make the choice. Doing what I say, instead of what somebody else says, is not taking control of your health. Taking control of your health is doing what you know you want to do after you have looked at the information. When you think about it, this is the way people transact business in every other aspect of life except healthcare. Nobody would make decisions about houses, cars, or even a refrigerator without information; but that's exactly what happens in medicine every day. We find that when people get this type of information it really cools their enthusiasm about tests, drugs, and procedures. Medical institutions can't do this or they would go into a gradual process of liquidation. So the information has to come from an outside source—and

that's us.

How does a patient get a consultation with Wellness Forum Health?

They call us and we have providers all over the U.S. and in 35 countries. We have online learning opportunities, but most of our education is live and interactive. I think people are sick of healthcare being impersonal and feeling like they're just not being talked to. We actually answer the phone 12 hours a day and we talk to people. We do that because we want to make sure that we know how to help them, and you can only help them by talking to them.



Pam's talkative cat Schroeder is well-known among her students.

Tell me about your conferences.

We host a conference every year in November. The one this year will be November 10th through 12th in Columbus, Ohio. We bring in the brightest and the best in the world on informed medical decision-making related to chronic degenerative disease, musculoskeletal health, and mental health. We are very excited that this year our business partner, Dr. Peter Breggin, a psychiatrist from Ithaca, will be presenting. He has written over 20 books on why we shouldn't be drugging people with psychological disorders. And Dr. Peter Gøtzsche, co-founder of Cochrane Collaboration, the most independent medical research organization in the world, will also be a presenter.

Where will it be?

Our conferences have all been held at the Crowne Plaza Columbus North, which is just a mile from our office. Therefore, attendees can also visit our facility, which is a playground for people who like health! We have a hot yoga studio, a complete gym with a boxing ring, a commercial kitchen, and classrooms. It's a just a wonderful environment.

Do you really offer monthly dinners?

We do. We have a monthly dinner that allows people to just come and find out what we do.

We don't encourage people to bring anything but their bodies!

What is the Wellness Forum Foundation?

We started the foundation with the idea that we were going to do a lot more work in schools to help kids learn about healthier eating. We have done a lot of that over the years, but the school lunch program and improving school nutrition programs has proven to be an immovable force. So we decided a few years ago that we were going to move in two directions: We are going to fund the research on plant-based dietary intervention and also offer programming to people who cannot afford it. There are a lot of people who just cannot afford to come here and spend money on educational programs. So we

donate a lot of our services through the foundation to people who cannot afford to hire us. And because it is 501(C)(3), donations are tax deductible.

"I think people are sick of healthcare being impersonal and feeling like they're just not being talked to."

When I was researching Wellness Forum Health, I discovered that that you are inextricably linked to Chef Del Sroufe. How did that association come about?

Del and I actually went to high school together, but he graduated a couple of years later and we lost track. However, one day I walked into a bakery he operated in a co-op market. Del was there and we started talking. I always wanted to have my own food

line, so our relationship started with him providing products for me, but we worked so well together that he eventually became a partner. He still runs the kitchen and serves as the Executive Chef, but he also plays a major role in our bigger healthcare company.

Can people buy healthy products from the Wellness Forum Health kitchen?

Yes they can. We have Wellness Forum Foods, which also does catering for weddings and events. People can stop by and pick up their food and we also deliver. Additionally, we manufacture food products, such as dry mixes, that can be shipped all over the world.

Can people find their food products on the Wellness Forum Health website?

No, you have to call us. We're those strange folks who still like to talk to people. The other thing is, we really don't want people to have a *product* relationship with us. We want people to have an *education* relationship with us. People will call sometimes and ask about green tea or

some other product. What's standing between people and health is not our soup mix. But, what's standing between people and health is that they're not making informed decisions and they're not taking care of themselves. That's the issue we want to address, and if we're addressing that and you find some of the products that we make helpful, terrific. But education is the real goal.

Do other members of the Popper family share your enthusiasm for this lifestyle?

Well, my dad does. My dad is 86 years old and he's in the office next to me. He's been eating this diet for a long time and he weighs today what he weighed when he graduated from college. He's athletic and he's healthy. Unfortunately, other than my father, nobody else in the family follows this lifestyle. I've been at family dinners where my uncles, cousins, or whomever, says, "Boy, I bet it really bothers you to see us eating this way," and I understand the mentality because not everybody's ready to do it. I say, "It just means that those of us in this business will all be gainfully employed for a really long time if everybody keeps eating this way."

When you are not working at Wellness Forum Health and writing companion books to *Forks Over Knives* or *Food Choices*, what do you do for fun and recreation?

Lots of things! I like running, and we have a hot yoga studio here at Wellness Forum Health that I really love. I'm also an avid reader and belong to a book club. I also really love traveling and, fortunately, I have been able to see a lot of the world doing this work. I also enjoy spending time with friends, watching movies, and going to art exhibits. Ballet has always been a love of mine and we have one of the best companies in the country here in Columbus, which I helped start 30 some years ago. I'm an avid ballet fan and belong to the Director's Circle where I volunteer and contribute a lot to the dance company.

It strikes me that you've been involved in the progressive health movement for a good many years and have had the rare opportunity and privilege of being associated with some of the leading voices of the movement. Are you optimistic about the future of our nation's thinking about health and disease?



Pam's dad, Ed Popper, at his desk at Wellness Forum Health.

"I can't even remember the last time I went to a restaurant and there wasn't something for me to eat."

some people look at this and say, "Why doesn't the government do this and intervene?" but I don't think the government is going to do anything. I think it's going to be millions of consumers who've changed their thinking and habits who are going to cause the world to wake up—and I believe it's going to happen in our lifetime. In fact, it's happening right now.

I can't even remember the last time I went to a restaurant and there wasn't something for me to eat. Nearly all the regular grocery stores now carry lots of healthy food. I remember when I started this business, people would say to their doctors that they were coming here to learn about health and nutrition, and their doctors would try to talk them out of it. They don't do that anymore. So I'm very optimistic that we're going to see this all shift.

Another driving force for change is that consumers are unhappy about healthcare. Providers are also unhappy about healthcare. When you get enough people who are unhappy about anything, that often becomes the catalyst for change. So, yes; I think it's all going in the right direction.

Thank you for sharing your story and your wisdom. After reading this interview, I know NHA members will look forward to your appearance at the NHA Conference in June. Keep up the great work!

I'm really looking forward to it! 

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