

Transcript Details

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Could Food Be the Medicine You Need?

Dr. Wilner:

If you've ever watched a cooking show or baking contest where chefs create jaw-dropping and mouthwatering meals and desserts, it's hard not to view cooking as an art, but what about using it as a form of medicine? This is NutritionEdge on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Andrew Wilner, and joining me is Dr. Colin Zhu, a locum tenens family physician who is board-certified in lifestyle medicine. He's also the founder of TheChefDoc, an online wellness and lifestyle education platform, as well as a published author. Dr. Zhu, it's great to have you with us.

Dr. Zhu:

I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for having us.

Dr. Wilner:

So, to start, can you share with our listeners what culinary medicine is and how you became interested in it?

Dr. Zhu:

Yes, most definitely. So, culinary medicine is blending the art of the culinary arts and also the science of medicine. In short, it's kind of like food as medicine, or how Hippocrates bestowed way back when, you know, "Let food be thy medicine," and it's honestly a lot of basic fundamental foundational knowledge that most people possess, and it's not something brand new, not something, you know, rocket science. It's more about bringing food, diet, and lifestyle back to the forefront and using it as

primary treatment. I basically got really interested in culinary medicine way back right after medical school. As you know, Dr. Wilner, we have a paucity of nutritional education. I think the most recent survey back in 2010 was the latest that I found, and they found that 27 percent of medical schools across the board actually require a nutritional course. For me, in my personal experience in my schooling, I only received about ten credit hours, and most of that was biochemistry, but food is a lot more than that. Diet and lifestyle nutrition is a lot more than that. There's a whole person approach to it, and so what I took from that was I needed to go deeper. I needed to go much more in depth, and so what I did was after I finished and graduated from medical school, I enrolled myself into a culinary arts program, and I went to the school the National Gourmet Institute in Manhattan, and I completed my diploma there, and since then I actually used the education to enhance my career in family practice, which I'm board-certified in, and to be able to help not just in terms of counseling one-on-one with my patients but also to put on workshops and food demonstrations and speak around at different conferences and public events.

Dr. Wilner:

And I know also that you're a locum tenens physician. How has being a locum tenens physician played a role in your passion for helping people lead healthy lifestyles?

Dr. Zhu:

Yeah, so for those of you that don't know what locum tenens is, it's Latin for "to hold a place," and I like to use the phrase, "a traveling physician," similar to how travel nursing is coming about, and so basically I, for the past almost three years, I've practiced in four different states, and I think it's a wonderful way to practice medicine, and how I use that platform to be able to convey and educate and teach is similar. I mainly work in an outpatient clinic, but through locum tenens I was able to work in places like the VA in New Orleans, work on an Indian Health reservation in Las Vegas, and help out refugees from West and East Africa in Seattle, and so it's interesting because, you know, a lot of different things are actually overlapped and a lot of different things are actually shared where people still go through similar diet and lifestyle behaviors. So, we all, you know, know of the standard American diet and know how that is not as healthy for us, and we fight a chronic lifestyle disease burden and obesity epidemic, and so using the culinary education and using, you know, my background in lifestyle medicine, I'm able to not only counsel patients here and there, but I also try to empower them to live a deeper and fulfilling lifestyle, you know, because a lot of patients, you know, they know that, you know, they need to eat more and move, but we need to go way beyond that and see what is their motivator to change and figure out what's blocking them. So, I like to go very deep with patients and find out, you know, what stage of life they're in and just take it to the next level.

Dr. Wilner:

So, locum tenens provided you with a diversity of experiences with patients and also, I imagine, some flexibility in your schedule so that you could focus on developing your culinary arts.

Dr. Zhu:

Yes, locum tenens afforded me to be able to go on some missionary retreats, it allowed me to give talks at different conferences and events, and mainly I give, most of my talks I give to health care professionals, and because I'm a primary care physician, I'm a firm believer that, you know, you need to be your own role model. You know, we were meant to be trained as community leaders, and if you don't practice what you preach, it's much harder to be able to convey your message to patients, to anybody alike, and so I wanted to live as authentic of a lifestyle as possible. So, but, you know, on the side I also have had the blessings of being able to travel around the world and be able to connect with different people from all walks of life.

Dr. Wilner:

Now, you know, back to the limited nutrition training that physicians get, you know, I'm sure all clinicians understand the basics of nutrition and the importance of vitamins. For example, I've seen several cases of Wernicke's encephalopathy due to thiamine deficiency here at the city hospital where I work, but apart from true vitamin deficiencies, is there any scientific evidence that demonstrates that certain diets really make a difference?

Dr. Zhu:

Yeah, definitely. There are a couple individuals that come to mind that I consider our pioneers in lifestyle medicine. One of them is Caldwell Esselstyn, Jr., M.D. He have a Cleveland Clinic nutritional study that he ran for pretty much close to 21 years, and he was able to demonstrate advanced coronary artery disease, which is our number one killer in the United States for men and women, and he was able to demonstrate how advancement of that disease is stopped and reversed in patients that he put on a plant-based diet, and also he was able to show that they were able to maintain a total cholesterol of less than 150 milligrams per deciliter and LDL of less than 80. Another individual that I can think of is Dean Ornish, M.D., and he also used a plant-based diet, similar for heart disease, and he published his study in The Lancet called, "The Lifestyle Heart Trial," and he was able to show regression of coronary artery disease through the measurements of the diameter of stenosis, and these two individuals are, you know, pioneers in their own game, and honestly to me, plant-based, whole-food plant-based diets, basically comprising a majority of dark green, leafy vegetables, eating beans, legumes, starchy vegetables, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and very, very, very, very minimal animal protein source, we are able to see a lot of chronic diseases are being, in fact, you can not only treat but actually see reversal as well, and so for me when I counsel patients, I don't tell them to go on a diet, I don't tell them to go vegetarian or vegan overnight. It's just through this mountain of evidence that we

see, I just tell them, “Just add more plants to your diet, and you’ll be able to gain more energy, gain more nutritional value, and actually consume a lot less calories because, you know, you are consuming so much fiber, so much vitamins and minerals, and so much, you know, roughage, you actually lose weight.” So, it actually has a numerous number of effects and, you know, not a pill form or a diet for a condition per se, and we’re able to see this in, you know, we’ve seen a lot of great results through the Mediterranean diet as well. It’s gained a lot of traction, but for me, I’ve mainly focused on a plant-based diet.

Dr. Wilner:

For those just joining us, you’re listening to NutritionEdge on ReachMD. I’m Dr. Andrew Wilner, and today I’m speaking with Dr. Colin Zhu about his interest and application of culinary medicine. So, Dr. Zhu, now that we know how you’ve implemented holistic, nutritional approaches into your practice, I’d love to hear what advice you’d give to other clinicians listening who may want to do the same or want to learn more about it.

Dr. Zhu:

I say that clinicians, especially primary care and basically across the board, I feel that diet and lifestyle plays not as our foundational base for our health in general. I would say the first thing is to watch the documentary, Forks Over Knives. I think that’s a great first step, and there’s a lot of resources that are free and commercial-free from any ads or any support like that to visit, NutritionFacts.org to visit and LifestyleFacts.org, and these are all evidence-based, all scoured for the most up-to-date nutrition and lifestyle-based evidence, and you can actually use this to, you know, convey your message to your patients and clients. There’s also a lot of conferences, for example, the Healthy Kitchens, Healthy Lives conference, which marries medicine and science as well, and there’s also, if you guys are interested in learning more about cooking, there’s a program out in Tulane University that hosts the first teaching kitchen out of a medical school, and that’s in Tulane University. So, there’s a lot of great resources. You can also reach out to me as well to learn a little more.

Dr. Wilner:

So, Colin, you know, while I was preparing for this interview, I found a YouTube video called, “The Thrive Prescription: Elevate Your Game,” and the episode I watched featured you and about a million penguins in the background. Can you tell us about that?

Dr. Zhu:

So, basically, this time last year I was able to hit my last continent, and that was on Antarctica, and what you see in that video is a sea of king penguins, and if you ever saw the movie, Happy Feet, that’s pretty much what it’s based off, and it’s a beautiful country. Like I said, I personally traveled to all seven

continents and over 30 countries and am lucky enough to be able to, you know, fulfill my passion for travel, and that's made me a better physician because I feel like self-care is very, very important, especially with our epidemic of physician burnout.

Dr. Wilner:

Well, that's a great story. Well, before we wrap up our discussion, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Dr. Zhu:

Yeah, definitely. So, like Dr. Wilner said earlier, I'm a published author. I'm the author of Thrive Medicine: How to Cultivate Your Desires and Elevate Your Life. I did release a Spanish version of this, and I would love to give your listeners five free copies of my audiobook, and it's basically, in short, my experiences as a traveling physician and a world traveler and, you know, using my experience and tips to be able to take your life to the next level, especially when we feel stuck at different stages of our life. So, I would love to kind of offer that to your audience members. So, they can reach me by e-mail, and I can help them out with that.

Dr. Wilner:

Well, with that, I'd like to give many thanks to you, Dr. Colin Zhu, for talking with us today about the culinary arts and lifestyle medicine.

Dr. Zhu:

Thank you very much to all you guys. Thank you for having me.

Dr. Wilner:

I'm Dr. Andrew Wilner, and you've been listening to NutritionEdge on ReachMD. To access other episodes in this series, visit ReachMD.com/nutrition, where you can be part of the knowledge.