

An Interview with Dr. David Katz on the “True Health Initiative.”

David Katz, MD, MPH, FACPM, FACP, FACLM



Editor's note: It is an honor to feature Dr. David Katz on these pages, as I have followed his extraordinary health promotion work with enthusiasm for many years. Indeed, I grinned when I first read his answer to one of my questions in the interview below that he writes “rather prolifically.” I've marked that as the understatement of the year, given his scholarly productivity is mind bog-

gling. But what has always impressed me more than his amazing output is his incomparable eloquence. I find his public speaking and writing as pleasing as it is persuasive. In this interview, I approached Katz about the new “True Health Initiative” recently launched in his capacity as president of the American College of Lifestyle Medicine.

I'd encourage readers to visit the initiatives web page before reading this interview. Susan Benigas, executive director of the American College of Lifestyle Medicine, describes their web page goals: “On the True Health Initiative home page (www.truehealthinitiative.org), all who have a shared passion for creating a culture of health are invited to register to become part of the campaign. As the initiative builds and grows, it will provide tools and resources that can be used by members to help promote the foundational principles of healthy living and healthy eating in their own communities.”

Paul Terry, PhD. Most big ideas start with a germ of an idea. Can you describe when the former “GLiMMER” was first a glimmer in your mind and how it grew to become the “True Health Initiative (THI)?”

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The development of the True Health Initiative (formerly GLiMMER), some 25 years into my career, has caused me to reflect on this quite a bit. When did the idea originate? I was giving talks as long ago as 1992 asserting that the “weight of evidence” about healthy eating/living was quite clear, but we only ever seemed to focus on the discord. That was in the days before the blogosphere took over our lives, so the problem is more acute now, but it was salient even then. So, to the extent this is all about getting past din and discord to reveal the hidden consensus, it goes back almost 25 years.

But the initiative itself is really a product of my presidency of the American College of Lifestyle Medicine. I was due to give a keynote speech at our conference, my first as president, and wondering how to make it really matter. How could I avoid going from president-elect, to president, to past-president without any of it really making a difference? I thought to leverage the office to establish this campaign, which could take on a life of its own, and just maybe, win over hearts and minds around the globe. Now with some 250 council members from 30 countries, the game is afoot!

The website for The True Health Initiative is marvelous. What was your primary design objective with respect to what you want the site's visitors to learn and experience?

Thank you. We worked with the KYNE PR Agency, and they are very good at this. Many in our team had great insights, too. I confess, this is not really my wheelhouse, so I let those more adept call the shots. My objectives, however, were clarity, lack of clutter, and subordinating design to intention. The main thing the site should do is convey the potential of this effort if enough of us get behind it. I agree it came out very well.

That said, we will be adding to it continuously as we grow and take on more activities.

The site pays homage to many of the best minds in America in the fields of nutrition science, health promotion, and preventive medicine. What did it take to attract such an extraordinary level of support from some of the busiest experts in the world?

There's an adage: if you want something done, ask a busy person. There's some of that going on. These people are so busy in the first place because they are seriously committed to making positive differences in the world. So show them something they think has a chance to do some serious good, and they make time. I'm the same way.

It also helps that we don't intend to ask for a lot of heavy lifting. There is a lot for the THI management team to do, but from the experts, the key contribution is to stand up and be counted. In other words, saying we agree about the fundamentals is enough. So I think it was novel to offer people a chance to be a meaningful part of something novel and important without having to invest too much. In essence, everyone has invested already, establishing himself or herself as an expert or influencer, which we are currently leveraging.

Finally, this is founded on relationships I have been cultivating for many years. I first called on people I know well, many of whom are highly esteemed. And then, inevitably, the “rich” get richer. When you see that a who's who is already at the party, you think, “Well, maybe I should attend this one, too!” I think there was some of that, and there will continue to be.

I am extremely gratified by the caliber and influence of this council and very excited about the power of that unity and the good to which we can apply it.

For more information about “The True Health Initiative” and to read an interview with Susan Benigas, executive director of The American College of Lifestyle Medicine, visit this journal's blog page. The American College of Lifestyle Medicine (ACLM) is the nation's professional medical association for physicians, allied health professionals, healthcare executives, and others who are dedicated to a lifestyle medicine-first approach to true “health” care.

As with the caliber of the experts you've attracted, the scientific papers and popular press articles you've posted are brilliant. What was your strategy for article inclusion and how do you see this section of the site being used going forward?

Thank you. I write rather prolifically, so we simply went “shopping” among my many hundreds of columns and blogs for some that were most directly relevant to the THI mission. Many of the other council members have written extensively on these topics as well, in both the peer-reviewed literature and pop culture settings. We polled members to recommend items to include and have been overwhelmed with great, relevant material. We are showcasing some of it now and will be adding ever more as our bandwidth (literal and figurative) allows.

Like all of your supporters in this Initiative, I strongly resonate with the premise that we must be better about educating the public about those tenets in lifestyle medicine where there is clear agreement. Still, I know you to be a capacious thinker. Is there any risk of squelching healthy disagreements?

I have had a few colleagues confront me with that, but I really don't think so. I see no incompatibility at all in the pursuit of learning what we don't know while putting what we do know to good use. That's really the idea here. We know enough to prevent about 80% of all chronic disease right now—the evidence for that is all but incontrovertible. And, fortuitously, the lifestyle practices that can add years to our lives and life to our years are better for the planet, too. So why on earth would we not do everything possible to turn that knowledge into the power of routine action? Why should that interfere with new questions, new answers, new details, and filling gaps?

An engineering analogy works well. We are now up to iPhone 6, I believe. That means the engineering has advanced in at least 5 major steps since the first was released. So should the first not have been released because it could not do everything the 6th can do? Should the 6th not have been released because some day the 16th will make it

seem antiquated? Did the release of the original in any way inhibit the advances that have brought us to the 6th?

Let's learn what we don't know, but use what we do. Not only is there no conflict, but I don't think anything else is sensible.

As you continue to champion for True Health, especially in nutrition, are there scholarly areas of disagreement that you think deserve rigorous debate and continued skepticism given current evidence?

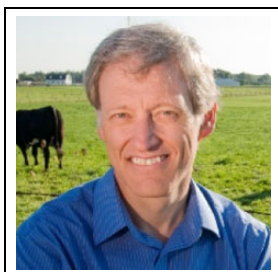
Absolutely, but they are details. Is fish good for us even when added to an optimal vegetarian diet? We don't know. For those who eat dairy, are net benefits greatest with full fat, low fat, or nonfat? We really don't know. For that matter, is there net benefit, or net harm, from including dairy in the diet at all? This is a very controversial area. What really is the optimal intake level of omega 3 fats, and how important is the total intake of omega 6 fats? And on and on.

But despite what we don't know, the basics—the things we do know most clearly and reliably—are enough to get us both longevity and vitality, as they do in the Blue Zones. Let's embrace and propagate those fundamental “truths” of healthy living that constitute a basic theme. And then, while living “on” them, let's explore all the variations. At present, we place such emphasis on the unresolved issues, we fail to see the theme at all. It's as if uncertainty about some particular aspect of some particular leaf on some particular tree made us blind to the forest. We will never see our way out of the dark wood of modern epidemiology in which preventable diseases steal years from lives and life from years from millions upon millions of us around the world until we manage to see the forest through the trees! We are doing all we can to shine a light that makes that easier. But there is no reason this precludes learning ever more about the trees into the bargain.



No Time for Food

Kevin Walker, MS, PhD



We have a peculiar, even bizarre, relationship with food. While eating is one of the most intimate acts we carry out daily, we're intent on putting as much distance as possible between food and ourselves. As a result, we're quickly losing our ability to discern where this reshaped connection to food is carrying us.

Looking back, growing up on a farm that produced most of what our family ate greatly influenced my perspective on food. I saw how photosynthesis made plants grow and felt the anxiety when periodic drought set in. From farming and the food-related career that followed, I learned that humans don't control nature. Also, showing up at restaurants and supermarkets didn't make food magically appear.

By sharing childhood stories, I somehow believed my outlook on food filtered down to my two teenage daughters, even though we lived in suburban Colorado. With busy lives outside school and work, finding time to talk and enjoy dinner together was slipping away. So one evening, I proposed that each of them help prepare dinner one night a week.

To make it easy, I brought out simple recipes and talked of food traditions that united families and fostered shared responsibility. Tamara, who I thought might one day become a magician with her slight-of-hand moves to hide and avoid eating peas, liked the idea. I was heartened until I noticed Melissa's tightly clenched teeth. A junior in high school, she couldn't hold back her feelings and blurted out, “I live a busy life and I don't have time to make things from scratch.” When I asked her what making things from scratch meant, she fired back, “You know, it's when you have to open up boxes or cans and mix things together!”

We laugh about it now, yet how they saw food is representative of how society regards food. While begrudgingly realizing that what we consume does affect personal health, we're unwilling to let food take away time from other pursuits. After all, each month, more than 200 million people (roughly two-thirds of all Americans) will eat at least one meal in a fast-food restaurant in the United States (note 1).

Our Disconnection From Food

Our current way to interact with food traces back to an earlier national pursuit—society could reduce the uncertainty of having enough food by continually increasing the amount of food available. The architecture that put this in motion began in the midst of the Civil War, when

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