

**Carol B Kenney**  
Natural Health and Wellness  
MS, HHC AADP

carolbkenney@gmail.com  
www.Pathways4Health.org

# pathways for health



*“Order is never imposed from the top down or from the outside in. Order emerges as elements of the system work together, discovering each other and together inventing new capacities.”*

*“When we choose to act locally, we may want to influence the entire system. But we work where we are, with the system that we know, the one we can get our arms around.”*

...Margaret Wheatley

## **March 2011: Barcodes, Health, and Sustainability**

*Families, sports teams, and cultures are systems. Each member plays an important role to influence the behavior of the system as a whole. Change in the aggregate comes through conviction at the personal level. Like Chartres, stone by stone, we play a part—far greater than we may believe—in future outcomes.<sup>1</sup> If supported by recognized voices in the media, even a small fraction of the population can bring about a paradigm shift in thinking.*

Mark Bittman, a nationally-recognized voice and expert on cooking,<sup>2</sup> wrote “A Food Manifesto for the Future” that was published February 1 on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*.

<http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/01/a-food-manifesto-for-the-future/> In his essay, Bittman suggests a variety of policy changes for a healthier, more sustainable food and agriculture policy.

Several of his primary recommendations include:

- (a) An end to government subsidies for processed foods;
- (b) The creation of federal subsidies for producers of “real” food” as well as for school lunches that emphasize these foods;
- (c) Support for sustainable and humane ways of raising livestock combined with education to encourage the consumption of more plant-based foods;
- (d) Subsidies for home cooking and cooking classes for adults coupled with food education classes for children; and
- (e) Taxes on the marketing and sale of unhealthy food.

A tall order? Not really. With modern technology and the current composition of agriculture—still heavily weighted toward small family farms that earn only modest agricultural receipts—we *do* have in place the tools and the agricultural profile to implement, without major dislocation, many of these ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> Even if this turns out not to be so in the end, it is good for our health to believe our efforts count.

<sup>2</sup> *How to Cook Everything; How to Cook Everything Vegetarian; Fish*; and the weekly “The Minimalist” column for the *New York Times*.

## Barcodes

Barcodes, whose initial digits already code the country of origin, could be made to code the environmental and health “footprint” of a product. The glycemic index as well as the amount of sugar, trans fats, chemical ingredients, and GMOs could be coded, with products taxed accordingly. We eat what is cheap. Taxing to make products that foster diabetes, metabolic stress, and chronic disease less attractive would discourage demand. It would also shift more and more purchasing power toward healthier whole-food choices, particularly if ways could be found to reduce the cost of organic, whole-foods. One way that this could be achieved is to direct the tax revenue from barcode-levied unhealthy processed foods, recycling these funds to subsidize organic, sustainable farming.

*Agricultural Profile...The Reason Barcodes Could Work.* When we think of U.S. agriculture, we may think of the vast acreage tied up in modern agri-business and commercial farming efforts. While it is true that much of our food today is produced on these mega-farms, small family farms are still the bedrock of our agricultural system. According to the latest Census of Agriculture (2007, released 4 Feb, 2009), 90% of all farms are still owned by individual farmers. In addition, farm receipts for the majority of farms total less than \$10,000 annually. This profile suggests that most U.S. farms are small, rather flexible production units. With the backing of federal subsidies and shifts in consumer demand, this broad network of small, individual farmers might adjust rather quickly and well to a growing demand for organic, sustainable, locally-grown foods.

*Measuring GDP at Home...Something to Think About.* Giving value to sustainable organic foods and humane animal husbandry is not enough. We need also to give value to home cooking. The government’s GDP may measure *earned, reported* income and product, but it imputes nothing for quality of life or the value added to goods that are associated with man-hours contributed at home. The GDP adds no value for foods grown in family gardens or prepared in home kitchens [nor the hours that parents spend on providing childcare, for that matter]. Growing food, buying from local organic farmers, and taking time to cook meals at home mean that we gain the added value of knowing where our food comes from. And, the kitchen gives us a creative outlet right in our own homes (see *The Gift of the Kitchen*, January, 2010). Government statistics should begin to measure quality of life behaviors that encourage connection to food, family and better health.

*“Fairness.”* We like to pride ourselves on our free market economy, but in reality we live in an agricultural system that is neither “free” nor a real market.<sup>3</sup> The government not only uses tax revenues from individuals to pay farmers not to produce, but also offers subsidies to (GMO) grain and soybean farmers to compensate them for depressed market prices. *It seems to me that the government is really subsidizing, through our commercial food system, our own medical system.* Haven’t we set up a “double-dip” system benefitting medical care—through subsidies that allow for cheap food that fosters chronic disease AND for the subsidized national health care system? Is it any wonder that medical care is the prime growth sector in today’s otherwise lackluster economy?

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<sup>3</sup> See Joan Dye Gussow, *Growing, Older*.

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Projected upon this canvas, the thought of using barcode-taxing to shift incentives away from fractured, commercial foods toward whole foods grown sustainably is hardly a wild proposal. Given the lobby-generated bias in Washington that creates an “upside-down” Food Pyramid, as well as subsidies for GMO crops and school lunch programs saturated with processed foods, attempts to shift demand and production toward healthier choices seem both reasonable *and* justified. Barcodes can be used to educate consumers, shifting demand toward healthier food choices. And, our vast network of small family farmers, far from intractable, seems more than able—if led by the nurturing hand of government— to shift more and more of our natural and human resources to the production of “real” food.

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