



August 20, 2011 – Grand Rapids, MI

## Finding Your Path to Health

One of the lines I use in the introduction of my radio show, *Straight Talk on Health*, is this: “One day something’s good for you, the next day not so much. How are you supposed to know what to do to get healthy and fit?” In today’s message, I’m going to give you my opinion about why that is. To do it, I’m going to call on a brilliant statistician and an economist. Odd choices? You decide.

### The Statistician

While researching a completely different topic, I happened upon an article entitled “Why Most Published Research Findings are False.” If you’re a scientist, that really throws you, so I read the article by Dr. John Ioannidis (1). Or rather, tried my best. Some parts were not an easy read due to the explanation of statistics behind it. But what is clear is this: the reason most published research is wrong is that the researchers find what they look for. It may be intentional or not. It may be inspired by professional motivation or money. But the point was clear.

I’ll give you just one example because really, this could take a book. The relationship between saturated fat intake and blood cholesterol has inspired some controversy. There are many who suggest that it’s a myth and have written a number of books on the topic. If you go back to what inspired the relationship between dietary fat and cholesterol, it’s a study called The Seven Countries Study. The lead researcher was Dr. Ancel Keys, a brilliant man who helped coordinate this massive research project. There are hundreds of studies that have been published from that research on fat intake being related to cholesterol levels. The problem is that it’s the exact relationship that the researchers were trying to find. After reading Ioannidis article, it’s no surprise they found it.

Ioannidis is saying that because that was the relationship between variables they were looking for, they introduced bias into their research. They checked only the variables that made sense and would support their position. If they did collect other data that would refute their hypothesis, they may not have used it during the analysis. In some cases it may be a mistake, but Ioannidis suggests that sometimes it’s done intentionally. We’ll never really know about what Keys and colleagues were thinking or what their intentions were because they’ve all passed. But what they published in the 1960s and after still continues to affect treatment for high cholesterol levels: reduce saturated fat intake and you reduce cholesterol levels. The legacy of that study was the push to lower fat intake in the 1980s that continues today.

What I can tell you was that they are at least partially correct about fat and cholesterol. But what we now know is that there are many other factors involved in determining blood cholesterol levels including exercise, refined-carbohydrate intake, obesity, and genetics. But that hasn’t changed the treatment approach very much, and it’s all due to the Seven Countries Study.

### The Economist

I’ve talked about TED talks before; the organization invites the best and the brightest experts in the world and gives them 18 minutes to say what they know; I recommend them as a good way to pass the time on a treadmill or exercise bike.

Tim Harford is an economist who gave a talk on The God Complex (2). His talk is filled with stories about making mistakes and those who refuse to acknowledge them, hence, the God Complex. He also explains why it’s

necessary to make mistakes in order to find real answers. (If you listen to it, pay close attention to the stories about Archie Cochrane.)

Our society doesn't want to hear that. We want experts who can give us solutions whether it's medical, financial, or even home designs. Experts often don't approach it by saying this: "Here are five ways we can address the issue. Some may be right. Some may be wrong. We're going to try each one until we find what works." What most experts say is, "This is the answer to your problem. It's the only solution."

If you think about it, that's what we really want to hear. Would you want your physician to say, "I don't know what will work, but we're going to keep trying until we get it right"? That is the most reasonable approach and with experience, they can identify the solutions most likely to work best for your circumstances. But really, would you want to hear it?

The God Complex may be more appropriately called the Expert Syndrome: pick a position and defend it. Most importantly, selectively choose research to support your position; discredit anything that doesn't fit with your position.

Talk to a physician about natural substances that may help what ails you. If you don't get reprimanded, you'll hear that there's no research to prove it. But if the research on their treatment approach has the kind of bias suggested by Ioannidis, why should we believe in it?

## The Bottom Line

Which path is the right one? It's hard to know. I like to go back to a legal phrase. "What would a reasonable person do?" I wish that every scientific article solved an issue, but mostly they just raise more. I wish that every expert were altruistic in what they recommend, but they are not. I would hope that every physician understood that if they have 1,000 patients, they have potentially 1,000 different approaches to the same condition or disease. But none of those are realistic. Those people are human and they are fallible.

And beyond that, we're all different. Each body is slightly different from all the others, and what works for most people may not work for you—and conversely what doesn't work for most people may work for you. At this point in time, even with all our scientific knowledge, you try the things first that have the statistics behind them, but bear in mind that trial and error is still the way most problems are solved.

All you can do is to continue to ask one question: Why? If you get an explanation that you can believe in, go for it, although I would recommend you run it through a few filters, like I explained in my series from June and July called "Legit or Not" especially if you get your info online. If that explanation doesn't hold up, find someone else to ask. That's really the only way to find the right path.

What are you prepared to do today?

## Dr. Chet

### References:

1. Ioannidis JPA (2005) PLoS Med 2(8): e124.
2. [www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/tim\\_harford.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/tim_harford.html).

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