

First Annual National Plant-based Prevention of Disease Conference

By Parul Kharod, MS, RD, LDN

A bitter cold Friday evening in November marked the inauguration of an historic national public health event. The first annual national Plant-based Prevention of Disease Conference, affectionately known as P-POD, brought together physicians, dietitians, researchers, other health care professionals and advocates to discuss evidence-based data on the benefits of promoting and prescribing a whole foods plant-based lifestyle.



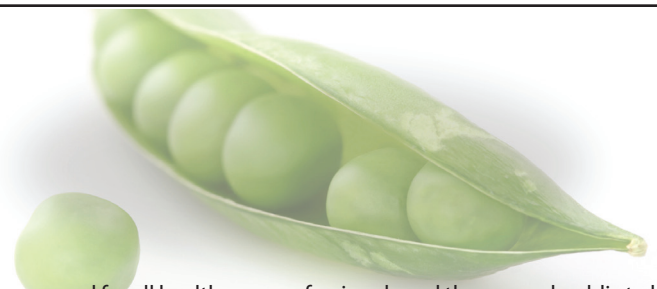
Front row (from left to right): Laura Sexton, Bob Leroy, the founder of P-POD, Brenda Davis, Joseph Gonzales, Monique Richard, Parul Kharod, Nalini Narhari, Ashley Rhinehart
Back row (from left to right): Dr. Stephen Esser, Matt Ruscigno, Eliza Mellion, Kerry Barbera

The conference was held in Asheville, NC November 14-16, 2014, and was hosted with the help of the Department of Health and Wellness, University of North Carolina Asheville. The educational sessions were held Friday evening through Sunday, with attendees enjoying delicious vegan lunches on Saturday and Sunday. Despite the freezing temperatures, the energy and enthusiasm at the conference was unparalleled.

According to Bob LeRoy, the founder and coordinator of P-POD, it took more than five years to get from an idea to the actual conference. Bob is a registered dietitian and has been working as Nutrition Advisor to the North American Vegetarian Society for over 20 years. He had been thinking about creating such a collaborative effort for long time. His vision finally came to fruition at the three day P-POD conference.

The P-POD Conference started its inaugural evening on the same day as the North Carolina Dietetic Association (NCDA) meeting. This was a coordinated effort for the benefit of attendees. Five of the P-POD speakers, including Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group (VN DPG) past chairs Brenda Davis and Matt Ruscigno, gave a lunchtime presentation at the NCDA meeting to reveal what would be in store at P-POD.

You may ask, why another conference? Aren't there enough meetings to go to? The simple answer is that given current research, there is a



strong need for all health care professionals and the general public to be educated about the importance of moving towards a plant-based diet:

1. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, chronic diseases are the leading cause of death in the United States (1).
2. According to a recent report released by the International Diabetes Federation, the worldwide number of cases of type 2 diabetes is predicted to reach 592 million by 2035 (2).
3. A 2012 report by the American College of Cardiology states that more than 23.6 million people per year worldwide will die of cardiovascular disease by 2030 (3).

It has now been recognized that these chronic diseases are preventable to some extent, and even reversible with changes in lifestyle and dietary choices (4,5). However, physicians and other health care professionals are not usually trained to provide an integrative approach. Moreover, there is a lot of research being done on plant-based diets but this evidence is not available in a streamlined manner for educating physicians and dietitians. Hence, fewer health professionals have been convinced enough to start prescribing it.

The first annual P-POD responded to these problems via evidence-based explorations of how eating choices may reduce the risks of cancer, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, bone health and other preventable chronic conditions. While welcoming the general public and students, it provided continuing education credits for physicians, nurses, Registered Dietitians (RDs), Physician Assistants, Nurse Practitioners, Certified Nurse Midwives, Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists and other practitioners.

P-POD was a collaboration of nonprofit agencies, accepting no funding or support from commercial sources. P-POD's national nonprofit collaborators were VN DPG, T. Colin Campbell Center for Nutrition Studies, and the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine.

There was an impressive lineup of speakers and presenters at the conference who shared their knowledge and expertise in different areas of practice. There were 19 distinguished speakers that included nine physicians, seven Registered Dietitians and three researchers. Four cardiologists representing a wide geographical area from New York to Texas to Canada, spoke about changes they have made to their own practice where they now talk to their patients about eating a plant-based diet. They shared case studies to show the reversal of disease and proof that we can make a difference in the growing public health crisis. Thomas Campbell, co-author of *The China Study*, stated that there is a serious lack of nutrition education in medical school, and that conferences like these are crucial to educate physicians about the benefit of plant-based eating for their patients.

VN DPG was also well represented at P-POD. Speakers included former chairs Brenda Davis and Matt Ruscigno, Nominating Committee member and former Nominating Committee Chair Joseph Gonzales, VN DPG Speakers Bureau member and past VN DPG secretary and State Coordinator Jill Nussinow, and Brie Turner-McGrievy who is a recent recipient of the VN DPG Research Grant. The main program reviewer/advisor for the Continuing Medical Education accrediting process was another former Chair of VN DPG, Suzanne (Havala) Hobbs. P-POD's Needs Assessment, a crucial part of its Continuing Medical Education accreditation process, was based on the work and writing of VN DPG member Susan Levin. The liaison between P-POD and VN DPG was Matt Ruscigno, who also set up a Facebook page and Twitter account for P-POD. Bob LeRoy is also a VN DPG member.

One popular feature of P-POD was a breakout session of interactive discussion groups. Topics included the role of plant-based intervention for heart health, cancer, diabetes, and sports nutrition, as well as general feedback or experiences of the speakers. The speakers were divided into five groups. The attendees could join any group and ask questions to the panel. Three groups were moderated by VN DPG State Coordinators: Danita Hines (Kentucky), Jennifer Swallow (South Carolina) and Parul Kharod (North Carolina). Another interactive discussion group was moderated by Monique Richard, former student columnist for VN DPG's Vegetarian Nutrition Update and now Chair-elect for the Dietitians in Integrative and Functional Medicine DPG.

Attendees also had the opportunity to participate in some fun activities including a group run led by vegan athletes Matt Ruscigno and Matt Frazier (No Meat Athlete).

Educational sessions focused on research related to diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, bone health, gut microbiota, and other chronic diseases. Topics also included the impact of the meat and dairy industries on health and the environment. The attendees were very energized by the data presented and discussions ensued on how to create a library for RDs to access this evidence for use in their daily practice.

There has been positive feedback about the conference.

Quote from an attendee: "I have attended many professional meetings, be it FNCE or other state meetings. I have never felt this kind of energy and vibe anywhere else. People attend meetings for different reasons. Everyone has their own agenda. At P-POD, we all were here for the same reason, sharing similar ideas and agendas. There was just a different level of positive energy flowing through."

Quote from a Speaker: "Thank you so much for creating such a wonderful event and for including me. What a great conference. I am honored to have been one of the speakers. I don't think that I have met a more amazing and inspiring group of doctors and other health professionals who all seem to be on the same page, in the same book."

Kerry Barbera, a student and VN DPG member stated, "This conference has to be one of the best educational conferences I have ever attended. I find it very encouraging when cardiologists can speak about their remarkable results of utilizing a plant-based diet with their patients rather than statins or stents. This gives me hope that maybe we are turning the corner and realizing the impact a plant-based diet has on one's health. I cannot wait to attend next year's conference!"

For detailed information about the First Annual P-POD Conference, please visit the website <http://preventionofdisease.org/about-p-pod/>.

With all the enthusiasm it has generated, work is already underway for planning the next P-POD meetings:

Second and Third Annual National Plant-based Prevention of Disease (P-POD) conferences:

North Carolina State University, Raleigh NC

Sept. 11-13, 2015

Apr. 7-10, 2016

Please mark your calendars, and watch for announcements for details and registration information. We welcome you all to be a part of this unique event and experience.

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Parul Kharod, MS, RD, LDN served as the VN DPG State Coordinator for North Carolina from 2011 to 2015, and has been actively involved with P-POD from its inception. She works as an outpatient dietitian at WakeMed Health & Hospitals in Raleigh, NC, where she counsels the adult and pediatric population with an integrative approach. Parul has earned a Certificate of Training in Food Allergies from the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. An avid cook, Parul loves experimenting in the kitchen with tasty and nutritious plant-based recipes.



VN DPG table at the P-POD with Matt Ruscigno and Parul Kharod