

Interview with Steve Marks, MD



STEVE and Becky Marks, and their two boys, Sean and Randy, live in Bloomsburg and have been friends and customers for five years. Steve is an eye surgeon at Geisinger Medical Center in Danville where he treats patients with diseases of the retina associated with diabetes, high blood pressure and aging. In February Steve and John gave a talk entitled, "The Agriculture-Nutrition Connection" at the annual Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) conference in State College. Here Steve shares some of his thoughts about grass-based foods from both a professional and personal viewpoint.

How did you become interested in the connection between farming practices and nutrition?

STEVE. A bunch of factors hit at the same time. The first thing was meeting John and Todd and seeing the nutrition statistics on the food - the omega-3s, the saturated fat, the cholesterol - that were so different than store-bought, conventional foods. Before that I thought of food as most people do, as a commodity; if one piece of meat looks like another, it must be the same. That was the first time it hit me that that was very far from the truth. The other thing was realizing how many of my patients were sick with preventable problems related to some of the common chronic diseases in this country. Another factor was our thinking about what is ethical to feed our kids. Our kids are both adopted. From what I've read, adopted kids go through a grieving process because they were given up at some point. I decided I'd do whatever I could to be as healthy as possible so that they don't have to go through another set of parents any time soon. I just started taking my own health more seriously. Also, my mother was always very open to healthy foods. So even though I wasn't turned onto it until five years ago, I think I was open to it because of my mom.

What prompted you to speak at PASA in February?

STEVE. I see people all the time going blind just because of what they eat. The other thing is the information that's readily available on the benefit of organics and grass-fed foods. So just trying to spread that information. Also, I feel very strongly about supporting local farmers. The phrase, "The pharmacy begins at the farm" - if I had heard that ten years ago in medical school, I probably would have laughed. But now I realize that it's so true. Not only does the pharmacy begin at the farm, but I think healthy communities and healthy families also exist much more readily if you have small family farms.

How do meat, milk and eggs raised on pasture compare nutritionally with food raised in a feedlot or a building?

STEVE. If you look at omega-3s, saturated fat, cholesterol, calories, vitamin E, and vitamin A, the profiles are all better in grass-fed products because of what grass contains. Grass contains a whole host of macro and micro-nutrients. When an animal eats those components, they're subsequently present in their foods. It's not possible for grain-fed animals to get all

those components. The other big thing is ruminants - cows and sheep - have digestive systems that are set up for foraging, and not for eating grains. When they eat grain they get sick more easily and require antibiotics. The diet can be supplemented, but it's well known that you don't absorb nutrients as well when they're synthetic versus when you get them through food. The American Cancer Society advocates whole foods because of this.

What are the benefits of omega-3s?

STEVE. Omega-3s are both anti-inflammatory and heart protective. They decrease the stickiness of platelets, so you have less tendency to clot, as happens in stroke patients. Sometimes people get arrhythmias of the heart, or irregular heartbeats; it protects against that. Also, a huge study has shown that people with higher levels of vitamin C, E, beta-carotene, omega-3, zinc and copper have a greater chance of not having their macular degeneration progress, which is the number one cause of blindness. One thing that might be good to point out is there are 360 mg of omega-3s in 100 grams of your pastured chicken. I realized that's a lot of omega-3s. There are heart studies where just a couple times more than that shows a benefit for the heart. It's not known exactly how many milligrams should be eaten a day, but different organizations have come out with different numbers. Like the Japanese, I think they eat 1 to 4 grams a

"The pharmacy begins at the farm."

day. A British study said if you eat something like 650 milligrams a day, that's enough to provide some heart benefit. So 360 milligrams - just from one little thing you eat, between eating a chicken or some eggs - you can see where the milligrams could really add up.

To what extent have you incorporated grass-based foods into your own diet?

STEVE. In the house we really only consume grass-fed products, whether it be cheese, or milk or butter. We no longer purchase meats from the grocery store.

What do you think would happen if our entire food system changed over to grass-based?

STEVE. I would say it would definitely have an effect. The New England Journal of Medicine in 1998 reported there are now strains of salmonella in human beings that could no longer be effectively treated because of resistance to antibiotics. They linked that to the low levels of antibiotics that we're consuming when we eat conventional animal products, most notably chicken, that are fed Cipro. Also, if you look at primitive hunter/gatherer societies, you can find examples of healthy, long-lived societies, whether they were meat-based or vegetarian. Those that are meat-based don't have heart disease, atherosclerosis, strokes or hypertension; and the meat they were eating is wild game, not feedlot animals. I'm quite sure that if people switched to eating eggs from grass-fed chickens, and on down the line, that it would definitely have some impact. ■

Steve is just one of several hundred local supporters of sustainable agriculture. He, like many of you, has played a central role in the growth and evolution of our farm through questions, comments and physical labor.