

Inside

the life of a

Public Health Nurse in Chronic Disease Prevention

Fatima's day started with a phone call, just as she was about to start sorting through emails. The man on the phone introduced himself as Mr. Fujiyama, and explained that he represented a group of fellow office workers who were interested in setting up a smoking-cessation program at work. Was that something they could get help with?

As a Public Health nurse who specialized in chronic disease prevention, Fatima had fielded numerous such requests. The wish to start a smoking-cessation program was great, but the results were often unsatisfactory. The heart of the matter was a simple one: whatever chronic disease was being targeted – whether a cancer, a cardiovascular disease such as stroke or heart disease, obesity, diabetes, a respiratory illnesses or osteoporosis – the most effective way to prevent it was to address a range of factors that included behaviour and the environment.

All of that went through Fatima's mind as she listened to Mr. Fujiyama. As was so often the case, the challenge was to hear what is being asked for, and then find a way to reframe the request to lead to a more effective solution. So she asked about the company's willingness to support the program, and said she would be happy to meet with them and talk about initiatives to support employees who want to quit smoking. By the end of the conversation Mr. Fujiyama was quite enthusiastic about following up on her suggestions, and said he would approach



management to arrange a meeting with her.

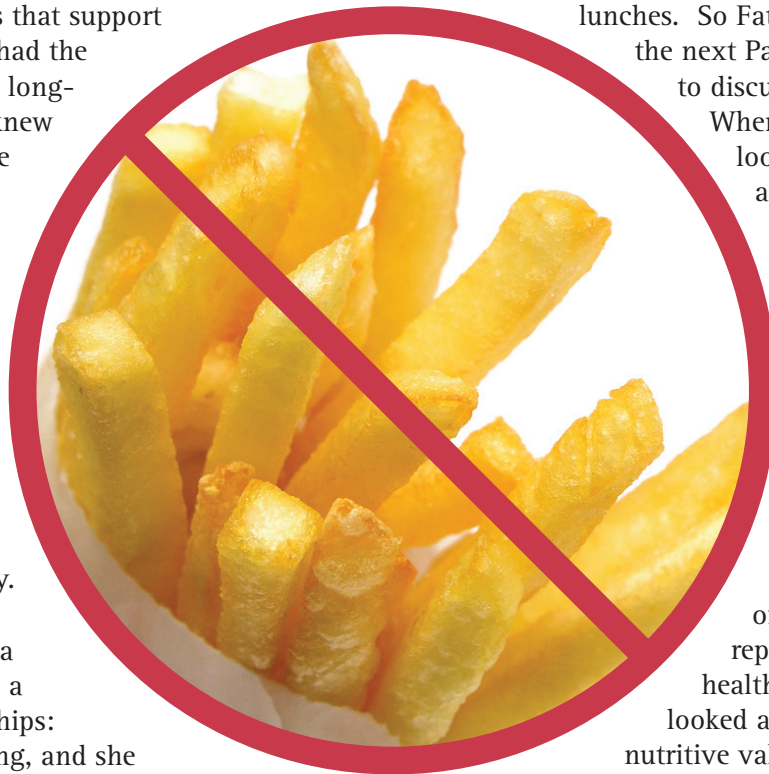
Smoking was one of many factors that contributed to chronic disease. Like some other factors – such as poor diet, inactivity or alcohol consumption – it could often be reduced by raising awareness, helping people build skills to avoid it, and

by creating environments that support healthy choices. Fatima had the patience to work towards long-term goals, but she also knew that collaboration was the key to effecting such changes: collaboration with workplaces, food banks, agencies such as the Heart and Stroke Foundation, Parks and Rec, and schools. Forging such relationships was essential to the reduction of chronic disease in any community.

One of the projects Fatima was working on involved a number of such relationships: obesity rates were climbing, and she was helping organize community groups to join in a program that included several partners from professional sports, the private sector and not-for-profit agencies. The goal was to get the public more active – and Fatima felt that this high-profile program had enough support behind it and excitement around it to make a real difference.

In the afternoon Fatima went to meet with a community centre interested in a family nutrition program, and then set out to attend the official unveiling of a new mural. Attending art shows wasn't part of her typical work week, but this wasn't a typical art show. The mural was in a school, had been created by students and – in an indirect way – had resulted from a request made to her by the Parents' Council. The Council had contacted Public Health after some heated debates around the issue of junk food at school and obesity rates. They had finally decided unanimously that if they could at least eliminate French fries it would be a good start. So they called to find support for their initiative, and were referred to Fatima.

Fatima knew obesity rates in the school were high, but experience told her that if French fries were simply yanked from the cafeteria menu one day, the kids would revolt. Still, she wanted to support the parents' desire to see their kids eating healthier



lunches. So Fatima arranged to attend the next Parents' Council meeting to discuss the issue with them.

When she invited them to look at the bigger picture and ways of involving the students themselves, not only did the parents come on side, the school administration did as well. Before long, pop bottles had moved to the bottom shelf of the cooler and milk had graduated to the top shelf. The Art teacher assigned kids the challenge of creating posters that represented their ideas of healthy living. Science classes

looked at digestion, and compared nutritive values of apple juice versus orange pop, or a salad versus a bag of chips. Social studies looked at the marketing of fast foods, and a food fair was organized at which local restaurants presented the healthy choices on their menus.

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And finally, this afternoon, in the main foyer of the school, on a wall that used to be taken up by vending machines, an art mural was being unveiled. It was conceived and created by the students themselves, and celebrated health in their community. Students,

members of the Parents' Council, teachers and a few local shopkeepers had all come by for the official unveiling. Yes, Fatima mused to herself, real change took time, but when the initiative for change was in the right hands, with the right support, little miracles could sometimes grow out of almost nothing.

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