

Interview with Mindy S. Kurzer, Ph.D., Professor and Director, Healthy Foods, Healthy Lives Institute at the University of Minnesota and Academic Editor for Current Developments in Nutrition



Dr. Mindy S. Kurzer is a nutritional scientist and Professor in the Department of Food Science and Nutrition with a joint appointment in the Department of Medicine. She is Director of the Healthy Foods, Healthy Lives Institute at the University of Minnesota, where she has been for thirty years. Mindy Kurzer graduated from the State University of New York at Buffalo with a B.A. Degree in History, and earned her Master's Degree and Ph.D. in Nutrition from the University of California, Berkeley. She was a NATO Postdoctoral Fellow at the National Nutrition Institute in Rome and Odense University in Denmark and a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Reproductive Endocrinology Center at University of California, San Francisco.

Mindy Kurzer received the International Life Sciences Institute Future Leader Award in 1992, the Ruth Pike Lectureship at Penn State University in 1994, was a 2006-07 Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) Academic Leadership Fellow and received a lifetime achievement award for contributions to soy research in 2008. After 25 years of NIH funding in diet and cancer prevention, she recently switched her scholarly focus to the area of Native American nutrition, resulting from a collaboration between the University of Minnesota and the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community (SMSC) in Prior Lake, MN. Since 2016, she has chaired the Seeds of Native Health Conference on Native American Nutrition, the first ever conference devoted to the food and nutrition of Indigenous Peoples. She is also working in collaboration with SMSC to bring more Native Americans into food and agriculture higher education and careers.

Dr. Kurzer is the newly-appointed Academic Editor, Food and Nutrition of Indigenous Peoples, for *Current Developments in Nutrition*, ASN's full open access journal.

1. How did you first get involved in nutrition research and education? What made you interested in the field of nutrition science?

I was always interested in food and nutrition, although in my youth I wanted to be an attorney. Upon graduating from college, however, I was concerned that my idealism would be crushed by the legal system, so I decided to go in a different direction. After hitchhiking from New York to San Francisco in 1974 (where I stayed for 15 years), and reading Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet*, my focus on social justice moved toward the politics of food. I became a vegetarian and decided that I should learn the science of nutrition if I wanted to work as an activist in the socio-political realm of food and nutrition. My intention was to get a master's degree only. Surprisingly, almost immediately upon beginning my first research project with Doris Howes Calloway at UC Berkeley, I fell in love with the science of nutrition. I soon realized how few studies of women there were at that time (mid 1970's)—virtually the only studies were those of women in pregnancy, lactation, and obesity—and thus, my inner activist became determined to perform studies on women, my doctoral project being focused on the effects of a low energy diet on the menstrual cycle. This was an unexpected shift in my professional focus, but one that kept me busy and happy for the next 40 years!

2. When and why did you first join ASN? What value does ASN continue to provide you?

I joined ASN (at that time AIN) immediately upon receiving my PhD degree in 1984. It was the premier US-based organization of nutritional scientists. Of course, there was no question that as one of Doris Calloway's students I would join ASN. Over the years, it has provided me with much

more than the latest information in the world of nutritional science. The annual meeting has become a place to meet colleagues, discuss collaborations, meet with former students and follow their careers, and continue building my professional (and personal) networks. Sometimes my ability to go to scientific sessions is limited because I spend so much time catching up with old friends, colleagues and students, but I value both the science and the relationships enormously.

ASN journals are of course among the very best nutrition journals in the world, and I appreciate reading and citing papers from them as well as publishing my own manuscripts. The reviews are extremely rigorous, and I can always be sure that the papers are of high quality and have been thoroughly vetted (as I teach my students). Although I haven't been personally involved, the ASN policy work to further the field of nutrition and to increase funding for research is a very powerful use of its numbers and reputation. ASN represents us all and does the hard work of speaking to legislators and conveying the importance of nutrition research to those responsible for its funding.

I very much appreciate the ASN awards and fellowships, and the recognition given to young and seasoned professionals. Those of us in research don't generally get much feedback about our work (unless it's negative), so celebrating the successes of our colleagues and students is a wonderful way to acknowledge those who go above and beyond. It certainly gives an enormous boost to students to be acknowledged by ASN.

I have just begun to become involved in the ASN mentoring program, and I hope to be able to pass on some of what I've learned to the next generation of nutritional scientists. This is another wonderful use of the large professional network that is ASN.

3. What aspects of your research do you foresee being most important for ASN members?

Recently, I shifted my research focus from diet and cancer prevention to the food and nutrition of Indigenous Peoples. This unexpected change in my career was due entirely to a collaboration between my institution and a local tribe, the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community (SMSC). Through this collaboration since 2015, I have become involved with projects related to Native American nutrition. My focus now is leading the annual conference on Native American nutrition (seedsofnativehealth.org/conference), and working with SMSC to bring more Native Americans into food and agriculture higher education and careers.

In addition, as director of the University of Minnesota Healthy Foods, Healthy Lives Institute (hfhl.umn.edu) for the past 11 years, I have worked on many projects integrating food, agriculture and health, which requires an understanding of systems thinking. I have begun to realize the importance of looking at the entire food system in addition to the excellent work already being done on isolated nutrients, foods, and nutritional biochemistry and physiology, and I have come to appreciate the behavioral and environmental determinants of nutritional health.

One of the most important aspects of my work that I hope ASN members appreciate is the need to understand that the metabolism of nutrients is only one small part of the ways that food influences health. In fact, the more I've learned about nutrition and its breadth, the more I've come to realize that in the 21st century, in order to improve peoples' nutritional health, understanding the social determinants of nutritional health are as or more important than understanding the biology and chemistry of nutrition. In this way I have come full circle from the very beginning of my career to now—always motivated by wanting to make the world a better place through social justice.

4. Can you tell us more about your new editorial appointment and what you hope to accomplish?

I will be helping to launch an entirely new thematic area for *Current Developments in Nutrition*. Although there is a *Journal of Indigenous Health*, and there are journals that publish papers on health disparities, there is no journal that focuses entirely on the food and nutrition of Indigenous Peoples. An extensive survey of 200 researchers in this field showed that there is a need for this focus area. Given the cultural differences between Indigenous and conventional academic ways of knowing, it can be difficult to find reviewers who can review these papers with an understanding of and sensitivity to Indigenous culture. The definition of rigorous may differ between Indigenous and conventional academic reviewers. Therefore, my role is to assure that these papers are rigorously reviewed with an understanding of Indigenous culture and the richness of Indigenous research—which may look different from what non-Indigenous scientists are used to. Rather than starting a new journal on this topic area, we decided to partner with *CDN*. We are currently working to publish the proceedings of the first three conferences on Native American nutrition in *CDN* and have begun to accept manuscripts for publication in this new special section on Food and Nutrition of Indigenous Peoples. SMSC has generously offered to underwrite the publication costs for these open-access papers, so that they will be free to publish and free to access.

5. What do you feel are the biggest challenges facing nutrition researchers, educators and practitioners today? What will be the game changers for the future where nutrition will advance global public health?

The biggest challenges (or opportunities) for nutrition researchers, educators and practitioners are:

- a. Regain Public Trust and Credibility: Educate the public with high quality sources of nutrition advice (vs blogs by influencers who may know little about nutrition).
- b. Continually Redefine the Field: Look at our roles as nutritional scientists, beyond training dietitians. Why do we need departments of nutrition when so much nutrition research is being done in medical schools, schools of public health, departments of biochemistry, etc.?
- c. Define Most Important Research Areas: Avoid getting caught up in fad topics and look at future, long-term needs.
- d. Utilize Knowledge of Food Systems: Develop a better understanding of food systems and incorporate this into our curricula and research priorities.
- e. Better Implementation of Nutrition Knowledge: Find better ways to convey what we've learned to make changes. We know that nutrition knowledge is not enough to improve health; no amount of understanding of nutrition requirements will improve health unless we also understand the social factors that interfere with people's nutrition: access, poverty, availability, cost, gender issues, racism, food behaviors, culture, etc. We need to understand that not only is it difficult to change peoples' behavior, but it's impossible without dealing with some of the issues that underlie the problems.

6. Is there anything else you'd like to tell ASN members, especially students and postdocs?

- Do what makes you happy, in work as well as the rest of life.
- Make sure that your work is aligned with your personal values.
- Understand the importance of relationships and develop your “soft skills” (interpersonal skills, emotional IQ), which can be as or more important in creating success as any scientific findings.
- Find a good mentor, not necessarily in your department or field, who can help guide you in setting priorities.

- Take risks—the greatest strides I've made in my career have all been when I stretched myself and said yes to something that I immediately regretted because I was certain it was beyond my abilities (but then had a great time doing).
- Recognize the importance of paying back for the privileged life that we all lead (including reviewing papers!)
- Hang in there—understand that there is no success without failure. Sometimes the most successful people are not the smartest but those who are the most resilient.

Dr. Kurzer spent over 30 years studying dietary effects on endogenous hormones and hormone actions as a mechanism by which substances in food may prevent cancer. She performed clinical studies in healthy subjects and cancer survivors, focusing primarily on breast and prostate cancer prevention. The diet and lifestyle interventions that Dr. Kurzer studied include soy phytoestrogens (isoflavones), soy protein, flaxseed, ω -3 fatty acids, and exercise. Her laboratory was one of very few worldwide with the capability to measure the full spectrum of estrogen metabolites in human urine, using sophisticated triple quadrupole tandem liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LC/MS/MS). Her focus recently changed to studying the effects of all aspects of the food system on nutritional health and the nutrition of Indigenous Peoples.