

**Sustainable Food  
Procurement and  
Agriculture Policy:  
Making the Case for  
Health Sector  
Engagement**

**KEY POINTS:**

The health sector has three important roles to play in sustainable food procurement and agriculture policy:

- Raising awareness of how our industrialized food system is adversely affecting human and ecological health.
- Promoting and adopting food procurement policies and practices that steer the entire food system in a more healthful direction.
- Advocating policies that can promote sustainable agricultural practices and a healthier food system.

**What health care leaders need to know**

**T**he food system is a key pathway to individual, public and global health—above and beyond basic nutrition. Thus, the health sector can and should be a key player in supporting public policies that promote human and environmental health. Where current food and agriculture policies undermine health, the health sector has both a responsibility and multiple opportunities to support policy reforms:

- The health sector allocates tremendous resources to treating food and nutrition-related disease.
- The health sector has traditionally provided leadership in raising awareness of significant public health threats, including the dangers of tobacco smoking, the use of lead in paint and automobile fuel, and mercury use in health care.
- Hospitals and delivery systems play a critical role through the management of considerable food budgets, totaling about \$12 billion.
- Health care professionals have great credibility on health policy among policymakers and the public.

Over the last century, we have radically altered the way we produce and distribute food. This transformation is fundamentally affecting the health of the planet and its inhabitants. We are already experiencing significant impacts in the form of increased antibiotic-resistant bacteria, polluted air and water, food-borne pathogens, and imperiled rural communities. Poor nutrition and the current obesity crisis, which are directly related to this transformation, have received major public attention, since they are risk factors for four of the six leading causes of death in the US: heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer. However, that attention lacks the context of the food production and distribution systems and their impacts on ecological health. Providing a better understanding of that context and supporting policies to mitigate the harms are roles that health care leaders are uniquely qualified to fill.

## Opportunities for the Health Sector

Health sector engagement in three key dimensions—raising awareness, market leadership, and policy advocacy—can help transform the way we produce and distribute food.

### Raising Awareness

Public and political support for sustainable agriculture will not occur without greater awareness and understanding of how our industrialized food system is affecting human and ecological health. Through education and information about the critical challenges, the health sector can encourage the public and policymakers to take action in support of a healthy food system.

Challenges	Key Issues for Public Understanding and Involvement
<b>Obesity</b>	Public concern about the obesity epidemic, especially as it affects children, can provide a valuable opportunity to raise awareness of the connection between many of the major causes of mortality and the ways in which we produce and distribute food. In order to effectively combat the obesity epidemic and related diseases, the public and policymakers need to better understand how our current food system favors the production of animal products and highly refined, calorie-dense foods, rather than the fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and other high-fiber foods important in prevention of these diseases.
<b>Antibiotic Resistant Bacteria</b>	There is a strong consensus among experts that antibiotic usage in agriculture contributes to rising drug-resistant infections in humans. An estimated 70 percent of all antibiotics consumed in the United States are used as feed additives for poultry, swine, and beef cattle for non-therapeutic purposes. That is, antibiotics are used to promote growth and to compensate for diseases caused by poor animal husbandry.
<b>Contaminated Air, Water and Food</b>	Agricultural operations that confine large numbers of livestock to a closed area—concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs)—pose a hazard to soil, water, and air quality. Worker and public health concerns related to CAFOs include heavy metals, antibiotic resistance, pathogen bacteria, dust, mold, and volatile gases.
<b>Fossil Fuel Consumption and Climate Change</b>	Industrialized agriculture methods are fossil fuel intensive; the U.S. food system accounts for an estimated 10.5 percent of the nation’s energy use and 19 percent of its fossil fuel consumption. The direct and indirect impacts of climate change on human health are substantial and include heat-wave fatalities, increased incidence of infectious diseases, and exacerbation of respiratory diseases.
<b>Pesticide Use</b>	Reducing pesticide use is a key health priority given the many human health problems associated with pesticide exposure, as well as damage to other species.
<b>Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities</b>	Low-income people and people of color face well-documented challenges to obtaining fresh fruits and vegetables and other nutritious foods: Either they’re not available in the neighborhood or the quality is poor and the price is high. Research shows that the scarcity of healthy foods makes it more difficult for residents of low-income neighborhoods to follow a good diet, compared to people in wealthier communities.

## AMA Resolution

In 2009, the American Medical Association approved a policy in support of practices and policies within healthcare systems that promote and model a healthy and ecologically sustainable food system which "provides food and beverages of naturally high nutritional quality." Importantly, the AMA also supported a directive that encourages, "the development of a healthier food system through the US Farm Bill and other federal legislation" and that the "AMA consider working with other healthcare and public health organizations to educate the healthcare community and the public about the importance of healthy and ecologically sustainable food systems."

(Resolution 405, A-08) <sup>[iv]</sup>

## Market Leadership

**H**ealth care organizations can make a difference by modeling good nutrition and adopting food purchasing policies and practices in their own facilities that promote local, sustainable food systems.

**Purchasing Power**—Hospital food is big business. In 2004, alone, the top health care Group Purchasing Organizations (GPOs) purchased approximately \$2.75 billion dollars worth of food.<sup>[ii]</sup> The total health care market for food and beverages is about \$12 billion.<sup>[iii]</sup> While patient food receives some attention in the media, cafeteria and catered food actually make up the largest percentage of food in the hospital budget, accounting for approximately 55-70% of hospital volume.<sup>[iii]</sup> Hospitals and hospital systems are now becoming aware of their ability to use their purchasing dollar to affect change in the marketplace. Demand by health care facilities is creating momentum within the GPOs, which, until recently, were virtually unaware of food production issues. As a result of hospital-driven demand, GPOs and distributors are beginning to offer and label local products in food catalogues and are contracting for sustainable products.

**Healthy Food in Healthcare Pledge**—One action that health systems and facilities have taken is support for the Healthy Food in Healthcare Pledge. Without encumbering facilities with mandates, the pledge is a way to align hospitals with healthy food initiatives. As of early 2009, more than 200 hospitals have signed the pledge, thus sending an important signal to the marketplace and policy makers about their interest in local, nutritious, and sustainable food.

Pledge signatories agree to initiate steps to:

1. **Work** with local farmers, community-based organizations, and food suppliers to increase the availability of locally-sourced food;
2. **Encourage** vendors and/or food management companies to supply food that is, among other attributes, produced without synthetic pesticides and hormones or nontherapeutic antibiotics;
3. **Implement** a stepwise program to identify and adopt sustainable food procurement. Health care institutions are encouraged to begin where fewer barriers exist and immediate steps can be taken, such as the adoption of rBGH-free milk, Fair Trade coffee, or introduction of organic fresh fruit in the cafeteria;
4. **Communicate** to Group Purchasing Organizations interest in foods that are identified as local and certified;
5. **Educate** and communicate within the system and to patients and the community about nutritious, socially just, and ecologically sustainable healthy food practices and procedures;
6. **Minimize** or beneficially reuse food waste and support the use of food packaging and products which are ecologically protective;
7. **Develop** a program to promote and source from producers and processors that uphold the dignity of family, farmers, workers and their communities, and support sustainable and humane agriculture systems.

## Policy Advocacy

**P**olicy is a critical tool for transforming the food system in ways that will help reverse the trend of spiraling health care costs, widening health inequalities, and rising rates of disease related to food and food production. Policies at the local, state, and federal level have helped shape and support the current food system. No single food policy reform will change the status of health in this country. Rather, a range of complementary policies that address various aspects of the food system are necessary to produce sustainable and meaningful change.

Two critical pieces of federal legislation—the U.S. Farm Bill and the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act—affect agricultural production, community food retail, school lunches, and more.

**The Farm Bill** is up for reauthorization in 2012, and includes hundreds of programs that exert tremendous influence on food production and distribution. It is the primary agricultural and food policy tool of the federal government and includes issues such as nutrition, food stamps, conservation programs, agriculture trade and more. It might easily be considered a Food, Farm and Health Bill.

**The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act** is up for consideration in 2009, and includes programs such as WIC and school food programs. The Child Nutrition and WIC Programs have provided critical nutrition support for low-income families in the United States.

## Conclusion

**T**he health sector has a major stake in transforming the way food is currently produced and distributed because of impacts on poor nutrition, increased antibiotic-resistant bacteria, polluted air and water, food-borne pathogens, and the potential effects of climate change on human and ecological health. Leaders from the health sector have begun raising awareness, engaging in market transformation, and articulating the urgency for policy engagement to promote sustainable agricultural practices and a healthier food system.

## End Notes

- [i] Food Service Director, Industry Census, June 15, 2005, [www.fsdmag.com](http://www.fsdmag.com), p 21
- [ii] From Healthcare Food Service Management website <http://www.hfm.org/fsdir.html>, accessed July, 2006
- [iii] Food Service Director, Industry Census, June 15, 2005, [www.fsdmag.com](http://www.fsdmag.com), p 38
- [iv] Action of the American Medical Association House of Delegates 2009 Annual Meeting: Council on Science and Public Health Report 8

## Resources

Available at the Health Care Without Harm—Healthy Food in Health Care Website: <http://www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org>

**Cultivating Common Ground: Linking Health and Sustainable Agriculture**—Sustainable agriculture practices are rarely seen as viable solutions for improving nutrition and health. In this report by the Prevention Institute we learn compelling reasons to link sustainable agriculture and health sectors. Also available at [http://preventioninstitute.org/pdf/Cultivating\\_Common\\_Ground\\_112204.pdf](http://preventioninstitute.org/pdf/Cultivating_Common_Ground_112204.pdf)

**Healthy Food in Health Care: A Pledge for Fresh, Local, Sustainable Food**—By supporting the Healthy Food in Healthcare Pledge facilities are demonstrating leadership by sending an important signal to the marketplace about their interest in local, nutritious, sustainable food and modeling healthy food practices.

### Fact Sheets

- Food and Food Purchasing: A Role for Health Care
- Healthy Food In Health Care: A Menu of Options
- Antibiotic Resistance and the Agricultural Overuse of Antibiotics
- Farmers' Markets and CSAs on Hospital Grounds
- A Purchasing Guide to Sourcing Dairy Products Produced Without rBGH

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*In Focus* is a series of briefs designed to bring key research findings on important health policy issues to the attention of health policymakers. This issue brief is based on Harvie J, Mikkelsen L, Shak L., "A New Healthcare Prevention Agenda?: Sustainable Food Procurement and Agricultural Policy," 2009—a commissioned background paper for the Food Systems and Public Health Conference, Airlie Center, Warrenton, VA, April, 2009.

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