

Letter to the Editor

Sir,

I would like to take up Geoffrey Cannon's invitation to send in more examples of 'loaded' terms¹. Do we really know what we mean when we talk about *Western* diet, *Western* lifestyle, in fact *Western* everything?

First of all, there is a geographical argument against the use of this term. If we talk about *Western*, surely there must be an Eastern counterpart, but has anyone ever heard or read of an Eastern diet? The adjective *Western* describes a diet based on animal products, rich in fats and refined sugars and poor in cereals and plant-based foods, as opposed to a diet that derives more than 50% of energy from cereals and plant foods, typical of the Southern hemisphere. It would make a lot more sense, therefore, to distinguish between a Northern and a Southern diet.

From a nutritional perspective, it could also be argued that the term *Western* has rapidly evolved into a synonym of *unhealthy*. How would we otherwise define *Western* diet? If we refer to the one eaten by the population of the *Western* part of the planet (according to our usual Eurocentric and US-centric point of view), this diet comprises a very large variety of foods from the supersize Mcdinner to bouillabaisse. Such use (and misuse) of certain terms leads to misconceptions, with the actual facts and meanings totally obscured.

Which brings me to another 'loaded' term, the highly acclaimed *Mediterranean* diet, ironically eaten in the West. This word has in turn become a synonym of olive oil. If the entire Italian peninsula, however, is considered part of the Mediterranean region, then my hometown of Milan, spread with, cooked, basted and fried in butter for centuries, does not belong there. When my great-grandfather moved from Naples to northern Italy at the beginning of the last century he was horrified to discover the almost non-existent consumption of fruit and vegetables (or should I say vegetables and fruits?).

May I suggest adopting terms such as processed, energy-dense, industrially produced diets to indicate the unhealthy staple which is causing us so many problems? But I am sure that your readers will have much better ideas.

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Reference

- 1 Cannon G. Nutrition science for this century, and other stories [Out of the Box]. *Public Health Nutrition* 2005; **8**(4): 344–7.