



Review by
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Ursula has spent most of her career in industry as a company nutritionist for a food retailer and a pharmaceutical company. She was also a nutrition scientist at the British Nutrition Foundation for seven years.

FOOD & NUTRITION ECONOMICS

AUTHORS: GEORGE C DAVIS & ELENA L SERRANO
PUBLISHER: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016
ISBN: 978-0199379118
PRICE: Paperback £32.99

This is a book for nutritionists who want to understand the principles and practices of economics. And perhaps also a book for economists who want to relate their skills to a better understanding of nutrition.

Both authors lecture at Virginia Tech; he's an economics Professor and she's a nutrition Associate Professor. Both rightfully claim expertise in the intersection between nutrition science and economic assessments – perfect fruitful coupling. And both now share their cool analysis of nutrition debate in the language of economics. And never has there been a more useful book for dietitians keen to take part in the many current discussions of national food policy.

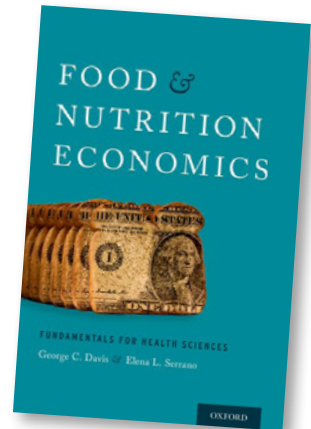
Economics is the study of choices. We all do this every day as individuals and as groups. Every food purchase we make is an economic vote for one product over another, and supermarket shelves are a near-perfect mirror reflection of what-we-buy. Many theories of neoclassical economics are simple and logical, but to engage in discussion relating concepts to diet and nutrition, you will need to know the terminology and recognise the main theories. These very useful tools are perfectly developed and tailored just for the dietitian reader. So banish discussions of nutrient content and food enjoyment; consider rather the health and hedonic utility of food choices and the degree to which these may be linear or elastic.

Less useful for expert dietitians, are the two chapters of introduction on food, nutrients and health. You should

already know all of this, albeit that the text relates to US data and information systems. But a good review nonetheless, and very useful for non-dietitian readers.

Most useful are chapters three to 10. These carefully lead dietitian readers through the logical concepts of classic economics and the less-neat but very current and exciting concepts of behavioural economics. The authors use entirely food choice examples, and make every attempt to keep maths and charts as simple as possible. Within the discussions of how much pizza and how much beer to consume, the authors develop the themes of opportunity costs, isocost and isonutrient lines, and measures of value. Cost per unit weight or serving or food energy are some of the different ways to judge value. But for foods, increasingly the time for purchase and preparation of meals is the driver of decision, and the boom in away-from-home food purchases perfectly mirror females-in-employment data. The time to select, and skills to prepare, rather than food cost may be the main predictors of consumer food decisions.

Then there is discussion of 'intemporal choice problems'. If ever there was an economic theme directly relevant to dietetic practice, this is it! Food choice is about the balance of health and hedonic qualities of the food,



but also about the balance of strength of data with strength of future prediction. If this is sounding Greek (no offence meant to that wonderful Mediterranean country), then thank Davis and Serrano for translating all these concepts to diet choices. It boils down to the certain pleasures of chips now, versus the perhaps far future health from the choice of some cucumber instead.

The many counter-intuitive insights developed by Nobel Prize winner Professor Daniel Kahneman are discussed (slow thinking and fast thinking), and again the authors relate all issues to dietetics. So issues of present consumption bias and future discounting relate very directly to obesity treatments. Chapter nine is a goldmine of data describing behavioural economics concepts to diet choice: the terms 'default effects' and 'framing' should be daily terminology used by every dietitian.

Also really interesting are chapters 11 to 13. These set out the economics of food production and supply. Again, all data supplied are US, but concepts apply as well to the UK. So why do farmers only get 3% of consumer spend on food-away from home, but 18% of foods-in-home? Does government funding to support farmers really result in subsidising public obesity? Marketing of foods is really about the costs of space and time and form, and when dietitians understand the costs of these different sectors, they will be able to more effectively target their communications for improved food supplies. I found the economic decisions of the hypothetical potato farmer 'Paul' particularly interesting: again irrational decisions when viewed from afar, are perfectly clear and logical when set out economically. The authors conclude the obvious to economists but perhaps not always to consumer advocates: it is not what consumers say they want or like, but what consumers pay for, that signal changes to market delivery.

The final three chapters are about the food prices and quantities in competitive markets. Supply side and demand side elasticity are discussed (the famous blades of scissors analogy by economist Alfred Marshall). Best of all, the authors discuss in detail many aspects of the current hot topic of taxing of sugar sweetened beverages (SSB) – if you really want to sound smart on this debate, make sure you mention the weak assessment of supply side elasticity in campaign predictions of SSB tax, described in the award-winning article by Dharmasena, Davis and Capps (2014).

Final sections of the book are a description of Cost Benefit Analysis and Cost Effectiveness – there is a difference, and both are increasingly demanded to support funding for nutrition education programs and dietetic staffing. There are no easy answers given on how to get that funding, and the authors share some sympathy for the weakness of many nutrition project assessments in relation to standardised effect measures. This needs to be addressed – over to you (young dietetic researchers with an interest in economics).

There are many formulae and charts; the authors insist that they are at the level of elementary math, in which case my skills are below this modest hurdle. But they are optional features with which to engage. The magical treasures of this book are the guided talking-through of economic terms and concepts selected entirely to delight an audience of dietitians. On reading this book you will not only know a dietetic issue; you will also be able to take a side-step, and look at the same subject in a different way and with a different vocabulary. It will not make you an economist, but you will be able to better talk with economists, and they will think more of you.

There are not many books that offer such an excellent return for the investment of a few hours of your time and attention. Highly recommended for dietitian readers.

We have two copies of Food & Nutrition Economics by George C Davis & Elena L Serrano to give away in a free prize draw. For your chance to win, please email us at info@networkhealthgroup.co.uk. Closing date for entries is Friday 9th December 2016.

