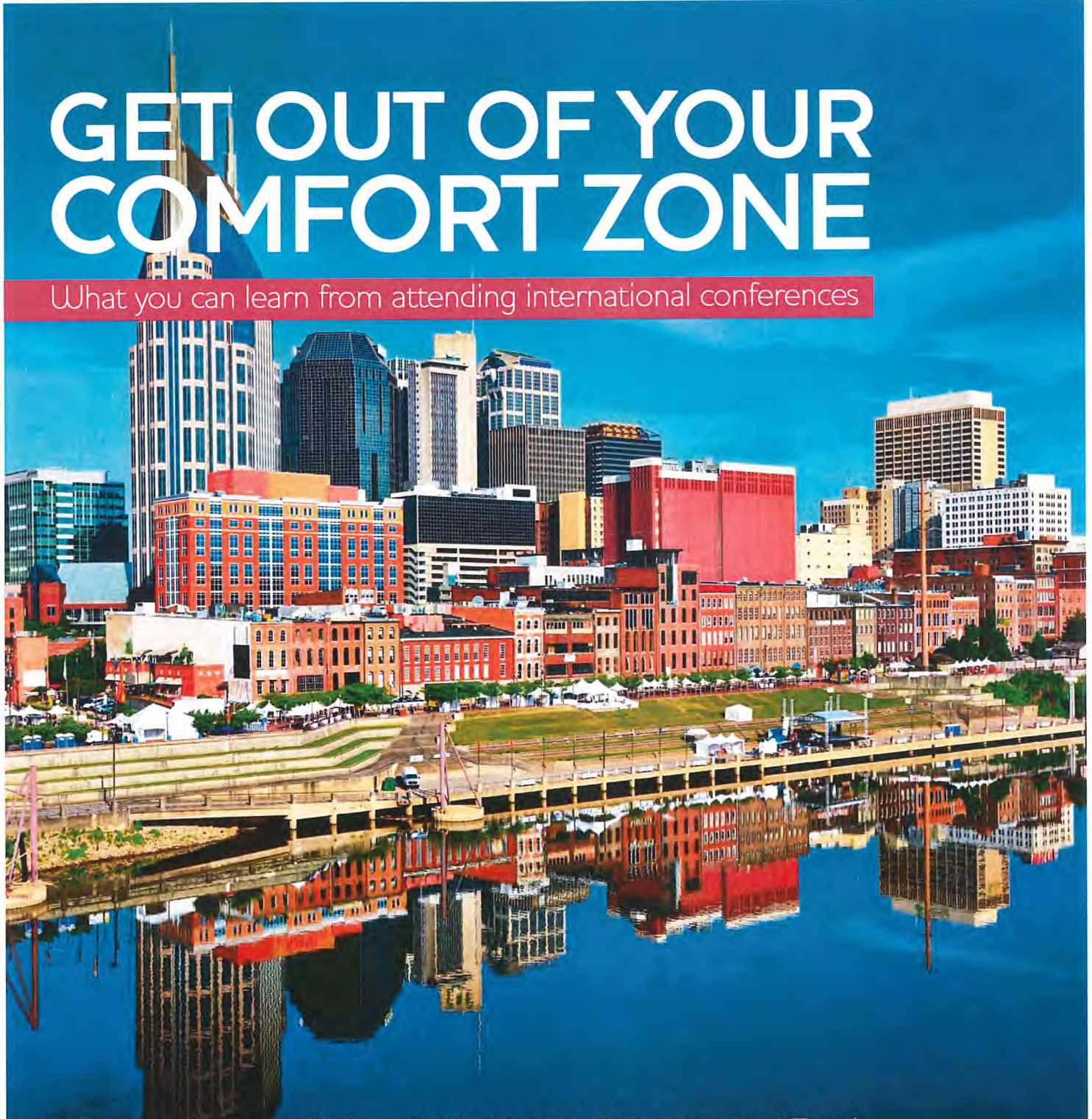


# GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

What you can learn from attending international conferences



A few months ago, **Deborah David** attended the annual Food and Nutrition Conference and Exposition, organised by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, held in Nashville, Tennessee. Here, she outlines some of the key debates and discussions that took place, while also encouraging members to travel further afield to enhance their knowledge and learning

**I**nternational conferences, such as the Food and Nutrition Conference (FNCE) and Exposition, offer the opportunity to hear the latest research on a wide range of topics from keynote speakers you would not otherwise get to meet and to network with other delegates, possibly for future research collaboration.

With 16 educational themes, involving more than 140 speakers, it was essential to plan ahead and hit the ground running, to get the most out of the conference. Session topics included: food waste; biodiversity and the future of food; food retailing and consumer health; worksite wellness; and those sessions with a more clinical focus such as obesity, diabetes, food allergy, and cancer.

### FOOD WASTE: THE DIETETIC CONVERSATION

Food waste is attracting growing public attention and media coverage. It costs the United States billions of dollars per year, with 30-40% of the food supply wasted.<sup>1</sup> In the UK, half of our food waste occurs at the household level, costing the average UK household around £700 per annum for a family with children.

As dietitians, we are uniquely positioned to educate others about opportunities and benefits related to food waste management. We can talk to our patients about cooking skills, how to plan meals around available ingredients and maximise leftovers, food storage and adjusting household shopping and portion sizes. In this way, dietitians can impact practices that minimise waste and contribute to a healthy lifestyle. The topic of food waste seems a motivating factor on how we should incorporate the principles of agriculture, sustainable food, and food production into educational programmes for dietitians and nutritionists.

### PLANT-BASED EATING – A MINDFUL APPROACH

An increasing environmental concern has led to campaigns such as 'Meat-Free Mondays' in the UK and renewed interest in plant-based eating, such as vegetarianism and veganism. Therefore, it is crucial for dietitians to stay up-to-date on plant-based diets (PBD).

Our water footprint is greater when we eat higher on the food chain. For example, animal-based proteins such as beef require 10-20 times more water than vegetarian proteins.<sup>2</sup> Choosing low-water intensive food will reduce our environmental impact. Vegetables, fruits, wholegrains and a variety of protein-rich foods like beans, nuts, seeds and soy are the mainstay of this diet. It is not exclusionary, but more about being mindful of plant sources of proteins.

One of the main sessions at the conference discussed various studies, including the EPIC-Oxford UK study, which demonstrated that people who eat plant-based diets (PBDs) are at reduced risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes, hypertension, cataracts, diverticular disease, and renal disease compared with similar health-conscious people who included meat

in their diet.<sup>3</sup> A well-designed PBD is safe and adequate at every stage of the life cycle and offers a great variety of flavours and textures.

As dietitians, we can guide our clients through gradual steps, in the transition to a balanced healthy diet with less meat. At the same time, we can identify poorly planned PBDs which could be lacking in sufficient protein, iron, calcium, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins B12 and D, iodine and zinc.

### FOOD TECHNOLOGY – SMARTER SOLUTIONS?

In addition to the sessions, there were over 300 companies represented at the event showcasing specialised food products, nutritional assessment tools, culinary equipment and information on emerging trends in innovative technology related to food, nutrition and healthcare.

Amongst these new product innovations, were items assisting people to eat less meat by replacing meat with sustainable protein sources, for example meat-free chicken strips made from soy and pea protein. These products aim to be a main meal component. It was clear at the conference that new food technology will enable more products like this to arrive on our supermarket shelves sooner.

### COMMUNICATION

An important theme throughout all the conference sessions included the challenges of nutrition communications. A common public interest is wanting to know "What is the best food plan for me?" As dietitians, we are at the frontline in sorting fact from fiction, and rather fitting to the country-western location at the time, one of speakers described how we need to be the "boots on the ground", taking the lead in this area.

One of the sessions encouraged us to ensure our voices are heard within multidisciplinary groups so that we are all aligned with the task in hand. The journalist Matthew Syed reviewed the New Zealand rugby team's performance last year and described the need to be in the "collective zone" where the actions of a group are unified. We can apply this theory by harmonising our dietetics skills and knowledge with other academic disciplines, be it agriculture, food industry, food retailers, or culinary experts. If we work together we can be far more effective than working in isolation. Additionally, through collaboration on sustainable food and water access, dietitians can explore nutrition and health issues not only affecting our own communities, but also considering ways to resolve global issues on malnutrition.

If you have the chance I would encourage you to step out of your comfort zone and attend an international conference. It can be an excellent opportunity to grow a network of colleagues beyond your own educational or work environment and, with today's powerful social media toolkit, communicate your knowledge and experience with a wider global audience. ●



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### RESOURCES

*Just Eat It: a food waste story*  
[foodwastemovie.com](http://foodwastemovie.com)

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