



# NUTRI NEWS

## The Department of Nutrition

January 2017

### FRANK HU BECOMES NEW DEPARTMENT CHAIR

On January 1, 2017, **Frank B. Hu, MD, MPH, PhD**, Professor of Nutrition and Epidemiology, started his new role as Chair of the Department of Nutrition, succeeding **Walter Willett, MD, MPH, DrPH**, who has served as Chair of the Department since 1991. *NutriNews* interviewed both Drs. Hu and Willett about the transition.



*Q: Dr Hu, you must be very excited about your new role at the Harvard Chan School. Can you tell us what you envision for the Department in this new role?*

Yes, I'm very excited about my new role. It is a tremendous honor for me to succeed Walter as he is a world-renowned scientist who has transformed the field of nutritional epidemiology and our department. As the new Chair, I want to continue and grow the strong legacy of our department. Most importantly, we will continue our efforts to maintain the preeminence of our research and educational program. In particular, we need to strengthen and expand our key research areas: nutritional biochemistry and metabolism, nutritional epidemiology, public health nutrition, and global nutrition. Toward this goal, we plan to recruit several new faculty members in our priority research areas over the next several years. In addition, we will expand our educational programs to train the next generation of nutritional researchers and practitioners. In fact, we are in the planning stage to develop a Masters program in nutrition. Last but not least, we plan to develop a school-wide program that integrates research and educational activities surrounding food, nutrition, and human and planetary health.

*Q: Can you tell us a little about your background and where you came from before joining our faculty as Assistant Professor in 1999?*

I completed my medical training at Tongji Medical University (now Tongji Medical College of Huazhong University of Science and Technology) in Wuhan, China in 1988. Then, I worked as a research associate at National Institute of Health Education, Beijing, China for two years. Before coming to the US, I was a visiting scholar at the University of Hong Kong and the Dutch Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention in the Netherlands. I was enrolled in a graduate program in epidemiology at the University of Illinois at the Chicago School of Public Health in 1991 and received a PhD in Epidemiology in 1996. I started a postdoctoral fellowship in nutritional epidemiology with Walter as my primary mentor after completing my degree.

*Q: How has your work progressed since then?*

As a postdoc, I was fortunate to work on several ongoing, large cohort studies including the Nurses' Health Study and the Health Professionals' Follow-up Study. These cohorts have provided unparalleled resources for conducting nutritional epidemiologic studies. More importantly, our department and the Channing lab provide intellectually stimulating and supportive environments for young investigators to grow and develop independent careers. I was very lucky to work with several mentors. In addition to Walter, I have also worked closely with Drs. Meir Stampfer and JoAnn Manson and many other

outstanding colleagues at HSPH and Channing lab. After finishing my postdoctoral training, I became an Assistant Professor in the Department of Nutrition at HSPH in 1999 and was promoted to Associate Professor of Nutrition and Epidemiology in 2002. I became a tenured Professor of Nutrition and Epidemiology at HSPH in 2008 and Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School in 2009.

*Q: What directions do you see in the foreseeable future, both in terms of your own research and for the Department as a whole?*

My own research has focused on the dietary, lifestyle, metabolic, and genetic determinants of obesity and cardiometabolic diseases. We are currently integrating cutting-edge omics technologies into observational cohorts and intervention trials using the Systems Epidemiology approach. In addition, we have been collaborating with researchers from China and India to conduct epidemiologic studies and intervention trials to examine dietary factors and diabetes prevention. Given my increasing administrative responsibilities as Chair of our department, I will need to make some adjustment in my own research portfolio, but I hope to maintain and strengthen some of my key research projects.

As for our department, it is critical for us to stay at the forefront of scientific discovery, translational research, and public health practice. The science of nutrition is highly interdisciplinary in nature and spans from genes to the globe. Thus, we will need to enhance interdisciplinary collaborations within our department, between departments, and across schools and institutions. In the next few years, it is important for us to bring in new blood to expand current faculty and further strengthen our department. In addition, environmental sustainability is an emerging area of great interest in nutritional research and policy. Therefore, it is a high priority for us to develop an interdisciplinary research program on the food system, nutrition, and human and planetary health.

*Q: There could be some major changes ahead with the new Washington Administration. How might that impact our work here at Harvard Chan, and how should we plan accordingly?*

At the moment, it is difficult to predict the impact of the new Administration in Washington on our work, although early signs point toward a less supportive climate for public health research and policies. It is likely that the competition for NIH grants will become even tougher, and thus we need to maintain our competitive edge in attaining federal funds. In the meantime, we need to identify alternative funding sources to fill potential gaps and sustain the department's fiscal health.

*Q: You were instrumental in helping to guide public policy by serving on the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee for the USDA/HHS. What was your experience there and what lessons have you learned?*

It was a privilege for me to serve on the 2015 Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, along with 13 other leading experts. The process was long and very time-consuming, but well worth the time and effort. One of the most important lessons that I have learned is that translating scientific evidence into policies is not straightforward. Besides scientific evidence, we also need leadership, political will, and advocacy. Having said that, I believe that the most important task for us is to build the strongest evidence possible to ensure resulting recommendations and policies are evidence-based and solid.

*Q: What do you see as key strengths of the Harvard Chan Nutrition Department?*

I'm grateful to the strong support that I have received from our faculty, students, and staff. I'm proud to say that our department has some of the most productive, creative, and respected faculty, whose groundbreaking discoveries have re-shaped public policies and changed the food landscapes in the US and globally. Also, we have been able to attract the best and brightest students and postdocs from all over the world. I'm very fortunate to work with a highly capable and professional administrative team, led by Katrina Soriano. Another strength of our department is the inclusive, supportive, and friendly work environment that has been fostered under Walter's leadership. I think it is critically important to maintain such a culture in our department that promotes good health and psychosocial well-being.

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