



## KEEP CALM AND EAT REAL FOOD

Public Health Collaboration (PHC) founder and director Sam Feltham talks to *Hatty Willmoth* about his hopes to save the NHS billions by helping diabetics live real food lifestyles

**S**am Feltham wants to change the state of the nation's health. A former personal trainer, snowboarding instructor, and YouTuber, he is also the founder and director of the Public Health Collaboration (PHC), a registered charity that, according to its website, is 'dedicated to improving public health and saving the NHS money at the same time through better lifestyle information'.

It's no small project, either. Supported by a scientific advisory committee and patrons, PHC offers

a range of resources to the public and doctors, including recipe leaflets, a 'real food GP map', and links to external sources of support. It even has a cookbook called *Real Food Rocks*.

PHC is all about getting that information to the public, says Feltham. Its ambassadors programme currently has "just shy of 300 volunteers" and is open to applications from healthcare professionals and interested members of the public alike.

"They're all in contact with local GP practices to give them better lifestyle

information to hand out to their patients, so our reach is getting there, although we've got a long way to go."

There is also PHC's Lifestyle Club, a "service that is starting to get commissioned through the NHS to help people better manage their type 2 and pre-diabetes, and even put it into remission".

### **Fighting diabetes with real food**

At the heart of all this activity lies the concept of 'real food' with a low-carb slant. Notably, one of the members of

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PHC’s scientific advisory committee is Dr David Unwin, a GP who has previously spoken to *Optimum Nutrition* about putting type 2 diabetes into remission through a low-carb diet.

“David’s example is just incredible,” says Feltham. “It started off just under £30,000 a year that he was saving, and now it’s up to £50,000. If we extrapolated that across the 9,500 GP practices across the country, that would be a saving of half a billion pounds a year for the NHS — and that’s just on drugs for diabetes; it doesn’t cover the preventative costs of people going on to have surgery, which is where the main costs of type 2 diabetes comes from.”

He adds that of the £10 billion a year that type 2 diabetes costs the NHS, £2 billion is spent on drugs, and £8 billion is spent on surgeries. “If we can prevent people from going on to have surgery, then you have massive savings as a result.”

And he believes that such savings are a realistic possibility for the NHS. Unwin, he says, helped 50% of his type 2 diabetic patients into remission, and 90% of those with pre-diabetes into remission.

When he founded the PHC, did he expect similar success to Unwin’s?

“Yeah, that possibility was there and that was really the idea — that we could simultaneously help people get healthy and save the NHS money,” he says.

“I’m absolutely hopeful for it, because it’s coming to a point now where it is so obvious that [support on low carb, real food eating] is at least one of the options that people should be offered.”

#### **From web design to snowboarding**

Whilst the ambition seems huge, Feltham says he has always been interested in health. As a teenager, he worked weekends at a sports centre. “I did everything from children’s party coordinator to cleaning the showers.” He remembers getting “a good view of physical activity” — and of vending machines full of sweets and crisps.

After university he went into website design, but got bored and went to New Zealand where he was a snowboarding instructor for four years. He then became a personal trainer, growing a fitness bootcamp business to 10 locations across the UK, and developing

a YouTube channel and podcast.

Like many of the nutritionally-curious, Feltham wasn’t beyond experimenting on himself either. As a personal trainer, he was already compelled to promote real food diets; so for his YouTube channel, he conducted what he calls “overfeeding self-experiments”, using himself as a diet guinea pig to demonstrate that “not all calories are created equal”.

#### **Sam the guinea pig**

Feltham’s one-man studies involved putting himself on three different diets and eating twice as much as usual over three weeks for each one, with a three-month washout period in between.

“The first diet was low carb, real food,” he says, “and I was eating just shy of 6,000 calories a day...Over the three weeks, after taking away any physical activity that I was doing, protein thermogenic effects [the extra energy that protein takes to be digested] and loss of any fibre, I ended up in a 47,000-calorie net surplus. According to the calorie formula, I should have put on 6.1kg, but I actually only gained one and a quarter, and I lost 3cm from my waist as well. It was a really interesting experiment just on its own.”

He then followed this up with what he calls a “low-fat, fake food” diet. Again eating just shy of 6,000 calories a day, he reached an identical 47,000-calorie net surplus, but this time gained 7.1kg of weight and 9.3cm around his waist.

The third diet was very low fat, real food and vegan. “I’d have porridge with water for breakfast, and then potatoes and beans for lunch, and then rice and water chestnuts — stuff like this — and fruit in between for snacks.” He only managed a net surplus of 39,000 calories this time, because of the fibre he was eating, but nevertheless gained 7.8cm around his waist. “To put it in perspective,” he says, “the daily recommendation for fibre is 30g, and I was eating 175g a day. My wife was rather unhappy with that — it wasn’t pretty!”

He adds: “The idea is that even if you have similar net calorie surpluses, you can end up with different results, because your body does completely different things with the food that you’re eating.” Then, with a grin: “That caused a bit of a storm at the time.”

#### **Setting up the PHC**

Yet despite the traction gained by his experiments, Feltham wasn’t satisfied.

“We were helping hundreds of people every month with their health,” he says. “But one thing became clear after five years of doing that: we were going to constantly be in an uphill battle unless the root causes were actually fixed.

“And so I fell into this philosophical quandary where I was thinking, do I carry on with the fitness bootcamp business or do I create a charity that can really try to tackle this issue, and try to fix it?”

He pitched his idea for the PHC to the people who now make up its scientific advisory committee. “They said, ‘great idea, but where’s the money going to come from?’” However, an online crowdfunding campaign, launched in February 2016, doubled its target within a month.

In March 2016, Sam closed down his fitness business to focus all his attentions on the PHC. “And we’ve been going from strength to strength ever since.”

#### **Low-carb diets**

Primarily, the PHC promotes low-carbohydrate eating. “The evidence shows that there are some really good starting points in terms of real food lifestyles,” says Sam, “and a low-carb diet in the context of weight loss and type 2 diabetes is the best place to start, according to randomised control trial evidence.

“But we do absolutely advocate for whichever real food lifestyle works for you. If your blood work is showing improvement, and you’re able to maintain personal good health, then whatever real food lifestyle works for you is the one that works for you.”

#### **Public policy or personal choice?**

Other PHC projects include Collaboration for Kids, which aims to improve children’s food environment and information to reverse the incline of childhood obesity, and Real Food Runners, an informal running club for people following real food lifestyles. But although PHC promotes lifestyle changes for the individual, it mainly targets doctors and wants to influence government policy.

So I ask Sam whose responsibility

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good health is: the government, doctors, or individuals.

“It’s a two-way street,” he replies.

“The government is responsible for trying to help the population reach its full potential, and you have to do that in a holding-butterfly way; you can’t let go too much because otherwise the butterflies are going to fly everywhere, but at the same time, you can’t grasp them because then you’ll crush all the butterflies.

“Each point of policy and legislation has to be looked at on a case-by-case basis as to whether it’s sound, impinging on civil liberties, or going to affect people’s ability to get basic food energy.

“But then, at the same time, people need to take personal responsibility for themselves, pull themselves up by the bootstraps, and make changes.”

Even then, he acknowledges, it isn’t easy for everyone to make changes. “It all depends on your own personal circumstances, and your own approach as well. Some people are able just to see the diet that they need to do and do it, easy peasy. But, in others, you’ve

got some food addictions there. You might have two or three young kids, and you’re stress eating, and your cortisol is through the roof, and have all sorts going on. It all just depends on your personal circumstances.”

And the government must still play a role, he says. “Because if your food environment is just fast food shops and a newsagent that has sweets and crisps plastered everywhere, you’re really up against it. You’ve got temptation at every single corner and you have to be very well informed and disciplined in order to rise above that.”

#### Cost of living

Another obstacle that many people face is the rising price of food, which may make healthy living seem unattainable.

“It is absolutely possible to have a completely real food diet on a budget,” he insists, and directs me to booklets on the PHC’s website that suggest real food meal ideas that cost less than £2.

“Let’s just take some quick examples,” he says, “You can have a 200g pork chop for 64p. Then, a

portion of carrots is 6p, and a portion of broccoli is about 12p. So that’s under a pound, and if you’re happy to eat real food carbohydrates on top of that, a portion of potato or rice is approximately 15p. Then slather it with butter — that’s it. It’s not terribly expensive.”

“In terms of convenience as well,” he adds, “tinned fish are an underutilised resource... You can buy a tin of mackerel for under a quid, and then literally crack it open and eat it straight from the tin — you don’t even have to do any washing up!”

#### Local politics

Feltham’s effort to bring about change, however, are not limited to food and nutrition. Recently, he ran to be a local city councillor in his hometown, Winchester. He was unsuccessful, which he says is unsurprising as a “new face”. But he seems eager to try again.

“I have this need to try and do my best to improve things,” he says.

“The way to do that locally is by becoming a city councillor, to affect things that irk me that the local council have done. That’s why I’ve tried to get involved in that.”



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