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EATING WELL AT LOW COST? IT'S POSSIBLE, BUT...

The Montreal Diet Dispensary presents the
study on the cost of its Nutritious Food Basket

Montreal, April 4th 2007 - The Montreal Diet Dispensary (MDD) presents its report of the “*Étude sur le coût du panier à provisions nutritif dans divers quartiers de Montréal*”. Funded by the *Direction de santé publique*, the study aims to verify that the nutritious food basket is accessible to all Montreal households, particularly those with a low income. In Montreal, in January 2005, for a typical family (40 year old man, 39 year old woman, 14 year old boy and 9 year old girl), the average cost for adequate nutrition was \$5.50 per person per day.

“For the last several years, the Direction de santé publique de l’Agence de Montréal has been focusing on social inequalities affecting health, and particularly on food security. The MDD study clearly demonstrates that for low-income families the effort required, in terms of knowledge, cooking skills, motivation and budgeting, is extremely high. Even for the average consumer this is a challenge!” said Ms. Lise Bertrand, nutritionist-consultant, who is responsible for the social development team at the *Direction de santé publique*.

THE DISPENSARY’S CHALLENGE

Since the 1950’s, the MDD has established a Nutritious Food Basket that, at low cost, satisfies the nutritional needs of individuals according to age, sex and physiological conditions. Three times per year, the MDD calculates the cost of the basket in the neighbourhood of Verdun. On January 18th, 19th and 20th, 2005, the comparative study conducted a price check in 73 grocery stores in 20 CLSC territories in Montreal. The size of the grocery stores varied from very small (1000 to 3000 square feet) to very large (more than 30 000 square feet).

For the purpose of this study, the Dispensary completely reviewed the composition of its basket to take in account recent nutritional recommendations (omega-3 needs, decreased saturated fat consumption, elimination of trans fat, more fibre) as well as consumption trends (more variety in fruits and vegetables).

The study shows that, on average, it costs \$5.50 per person per day to eat a healthy diet. This represents a 10% increase compared to the cost of the basket before revising its content. Also, the recent rise of the price of milk caused an additional 10% increase of the price of the basket, bringing it to \$6.11 in January 2007.

The food basket represents 32% of the “Minimum Adequate Standard of Living” established by the MDD (which is equivalent to welfare recipients’ or low-wage earners’ total income). Yet, according to statistics, only 21% of the income of Quebec households with less than \$22,000 a year is dedicated to food. Marie-Paule Duquette, MDD Executive Director, stresses: “*According to a study we carried out with our clientele, these families dedicate 46% of their income to housing. This explains why the Nutritious Food Basket is above what the 22.7% low-income*

PLUS...

Considering the food basket weekly average cost for the typical family according to territories socio-economic status, variations are statistically not significant. Yet, it is interesting to note that areas with the highest socio-economic status have the lowest costing basket.

The cost of the Nutritious Food Basket varies by \$2 per person per day (\$4.71 to \$6.60) within the 73 stores where prices were compiled. This represents a \$56 difference per week for the typical family.

On the whole, the larger the size of the store, the lower the cost of the basket. However, this tendency is far less visible in neighborhoods with a very low socio-economic status.

THE CHEF'S CHALLENGE

Aware of the difficulties encountered by some families to have a healthy diet, the MDD wanted to know: *“Is it possible to prepare mouth-watering, tempting meals, at low cost, using the basic foods in the nutritious basket?”*

The Dispensary challenged four chefs, asking them to prepare healthy delicious recipes at low cost. Sœur Angèle, Pasquale Vari and Nicole Anne Gagnon (both of them teachers at the *Institut de tourisme et d’hôtellerie du Québec*), as well as Stelio Perombelon participated in the challenge.

“In my opinion, the main challenge in home food preparation is the lack of culinary knowledge” says Sœur Angèle.

“Facing financial difficulties does not necessarily mean that one must have plain, sad and ordinary meals. But, I can imagine that when one has no culinary experience and when, in addition, the budget is limited, the burden must be heavy” mentions Nicole Anne Gagnon.

Stelio Perombelon wanted to understand for himself what it means to live day to day with budget restraint. *“I wanted to put myself in the shoes of disadvantaged people. I think that they need more culinary skills, more nutrition knowledge, more support and more organization.”*

Renowned as an ambassador of Italian cooking in Québec, Pasquale Vari thinks the same: *“People need guidance.”*

THE FAMILIES' CHALLENGE

“In devising our basket, we intentionally chose basic foods that bring nutritive value as well as lower cost. The consequence of this choice: it is necessary to cook every day, which is challenging, especially when families are limited not only by money but by the choice of foods that fit within their budget. In fact, few people with higher incomes would be able to manage within the constraints faced by those with lower incomes” Ms. Duquette underlines.

This is why initiatives that support food security in communities are so important: cooperatives, community gardens, food-buying groups, food-sharing stores, collective kitchens, cooking workshops, etc. Studies on these initiatives have demonstrated their potential to increase the sense of personal efficacy in regards to culinary competence and the ability to make healthy choices without spending a fortune. In this sense, the MDD offers activities on healthy cooking to its clients. A guide, “Eating Well on a Small Budget”, based on the Nutritious Food Basket is also available as a simple user-friendly resource.

Accordingly, it is why social solidarity in terms of access to food necessitates speaking to elected officials on behalf of those who live in poverty in order to improve their life conditions, namely in regard to the cost of rent as well as the price of basic foods.

WHAT IS THE MONTREAL DIET DISPENSARY?

Founded in 1879 by Emily DeWitt, the Montreal Diet Dispensary (MDD) is a non-profit agency that helps disadvantaged people, mainly pregnant women. The MDD has developed a nutrition counselling and food supplement program for mothers-to-be to motivate them to eat well, ensuring a head start in life for their children.

Each year, the MDD helps 1,700 needy pregnant women. This represents approximately one third of disadvantaged pregnant women in Montreal. The MDD services result in a very low rate of low-birth-weight babies: less than 5% on average. Without intervention, 10 to 12% of babies born to these mothers risk being born too small. The MDD intervention reduces this risk by at least 50% while fostering the empowerment of these women.

For more information, visit www.ddm-mdd.org

To obtain a copy of the study, contact Marie-Paule Duquette at mpduquet@qc.aira.com

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