

Coconut oil is bad for you? **not true!**

Reba Paul

A conversation with Mr. T.K.Jose IAS, Chairman of the Coconut Development Board reveals many truths about the propaganda and misconceptions surrounding coconut oil.



After weeks of soaking in information and biochemical perceptions of the oil that was the staple fat of God's Own Country, I had to admit that there was a lot of information that was not seeing the light of day, to be honestly examined and evaluated by unbiased minds. A trip to the Coconut Development Board was essential – there was sure to be someone there who would help to make sense of this epic confusion. The CDB is an organization committed to the integrated development of the coconut industry by promoting the cultivation of coconuts, its products, by product utilization, and through diversification and value additions of the existing procedures.

The Chairman of the CDB in Kochi is Mr. T.K. Jose IAS. Known for nurturing the growth of Kudumbasree (a women oriented, community based state-wide poverty eradication mission), in Kerala, Mr. Jose is eloquent, precise and action-oriented. Since taking over as Chairman of the Board in May 2011, he has successfully implemented several schemes that have been helping farmers and home-based consumers alike. With his detailed and far reaching understanding of the coconut oil conundrum, Mr. T.K. Jose sheds light on the multidimensional aspects behind the blacklisting of coconut oil, the economics that rule the oil industry and the immense potential that this miracle nut holds.

HC: First of all, if coconut oil is not harmful to the human body, why is it that it has got such a bad reputation?

TKJ: The negative news about coconut oil is the result of unripened research, and the publicity that has been given to incomplete findings. The research

information that people have been basing their belief on is primarily from a study that was indirectly funded by the American Soybean lobby. So how unbiased would they be with regard to the findings, is something that we have to consider. Secondly the findings that they put out, have never been clinically proven, so what is the basis of this negative publicity? It definitely does not have an accurate scientific basis.



HC: If it's not based on scientific findings, why do you suppose this idea took root so strongly in peoples' minds?

TKJ: Well, it's a perception that started at the time of World War II. After the war, in America there was dollar devaluation. Coconut oil was being widely used, but it was transit goods – and import of goods of this category was banned for a time to allow the dollar to recover. At this time, soybean cultivation and other vegetable oils began to be produced domestically. As they started gaining ground, it was essential that coconut oil did not come back into the picture. In the years after this inaccurate finding was widely publicized, the American Soybean Industry increased their profitability by 40 per cent. They widely publicized the fact that soybean oil does not contain saturated fatty acids, and used that as the main reason for stating that this oil was much better

for human consumption.

HC: Saturated fats are bad for your heart - this is something that we have been hearing for years now. Are you saying that's not true?

TKJ: Actually, in the 1950s many science streams like biochemistry and organic chemistry were not as advanced as they are today. When the findings from these early, incomplete studies were publicized, the public were told that all saturated fats were bad for the human body, and doctors were taught to advise their patients to completely avoid these fats. It was an inaccurate statement that was based on inaccurate perception. It's like saying that being in the middle of a busy road is the safest place to be, because accidents usually happen on the side of the road – it's an absurd and spurious correlation! In recent years, science has been telling us the opposite - that a certain amount of saturated fats are essential for healthy physical function.

HC: It's hard to understand how scientists would just be taken in by this, if it was scientifically inaccurate. We have the entire system telling us that saturated fats are the number one enemy of a healthy heart.

TKJ: Doctors and researchers in the USA and other Western countries have continued to honestly examine this idea.

There is a huge amount of research being done that has shown consistently that this perception is untrue, but these findings are not released in the mass media. Many doctors now agree that saturated fats can only be considered as one of many factors that may contribute to heart disease. There is also much proof that not all saturated fats are alike – there are long chained, medium chained

and short chained fats. Each of these has different breakdowns and chemical reactions in our body. So to categorize all saturated fats into one basket and state that they are harmful is now scientifically proven and understood to be an inaccurate statement. Only long-chained fatty acids are dangerous to the human body. Ironically, what many people do not know is that the USA imports a large amount of coconut oil annually. This primarily goes into their baby food and food industry.

H.C: So would you say that coconut oil is not bad for our cholesterol levels?

TKJ: There is no conclusive proof that it's bad. When the statement that coconut oil increases cholesterol was publicized, the public and even doctors did not know that there are two types of cholesterol – HDL and LDL. They did not know that LDL levels need to be lower than HDL or 'good' cholesterol levels. They only saw that coconut oil raised cholesterol levels – organic chemistry was just not advanced enough sixty years ago to be able to see that coconut oil actually helped to raise the good cholesterol, which would actually keep the body healthy. Latest findings actually show that coconut oil is helpful in maintaining good cholesterol health.

H.C: You mentioned that coconut oil goes into baby food. Could you elaborate?

TKJ: Coconut oil contains high levels of lauric acid. The only other substance where lauric acid is present like this is in mother's milk. Lauric acid gets changed to monolaurins, which is the compound that boosts immunity by fighting infections. Newborns need their immunity to be very strong, and that's why mother's milk has lauric acid in it. Adding this

to baby food is a very important aspect to ensure that the food is extremely helpful to a baby. Many companies in America have realized this and are adding coconut oil and lauric acid to their baby food.

H.C: So people should just switch to any coconut oil they can get their hands on?

TKJ: People have to be extremely careful to never use hydrogenated coconut oil. The best oil to use is virgin coconut oil, which is extracted by the traditional method. It retains the most amounts of nutrients and healthy fats, and is a very healing substance. This has been proven to have strong antibacterial, antifungal and even antiparasitic properties. The best thing about this oil is that it also has a long shelf life if you get good quality oil. It does not go rancid like the other vegetable oils.

H.C: People still believe that coconut oil is truly bad for you, and most doctors still believe so too, even though there is evidence showing this is not true. How do you think this can change?

TKJ: This is the same progression that happens when any new information comes in. Before 1957, the transistor was a huge device, with big antennae. As time progressed, with new scientific and technological innovations and discoveries things changed – a device that gives you music can easily be carried in your purse or pocket. But sixty years ago, if you told an engineer that this would be possible, they would never believe you! Likewise, the truth is that a lot of doctors get information from pharma-sponsored sources. Most of them do not have the time to do their own research and adequate reading.

You can be assured that if coconut producers were pharmaceutical

companies, the whole world would have been consuming coconut oil by now.

The only way this can change is through more research being done and publicized. No stream of medicine in our country currently has a system of organized networked research. Pharmaceutical companies, which have the capacity to enable this, do not help in this matter. In the West, there is a lot of collaboration that has started networking the research of different streams that tie in with each other. But this type of approach is tremendously lacking in our country. In Kerala, it is essential that the state comes forward to help this kind of effort.

H.C: Would you say that pharmaceutical companies are not too enthusiastic about letting the real news about coconut oil to be publicized?

TKJ: It seems to me that this is possible. There is much evidence that shows that coconut oil has the capacity to decrease heart disease, cholesterol and even diabetes. This would be a huge blow to the statin industry, and the million-dollar diabetes industry. Pharma companies would naturally be keener on disease management. That's the only way to ensure that you have a repeat customer. A cure for illness would be bad for business.

H.C: Despite this, there is the case that has received much publicity – of Dr. Mary Newport, who has reported that coconut oil has helped her husband, who suffers from Alzheimers, to have a better quality of life.

TKJ: This case is actually putting forward the possibility that coconut oil could help arrest the degeneration of brain cells. This is exactly why we need more focused research connecting the medical

and research communities. There is much potential and possibility that coconut oil holds – it is high time we started understanding it more clearly.

H.C: How much research is the CDB able to do? Are there other institutions that are involved with studying the benefits of coconut oil?

TKJ: The CDB has always been willing to provide all support to any organization that wants to engage in scientific study on coconut and coconut oil. Unfortunately, what we have seen is that very few actually focus on doing it. There are actually very few organized research institutes associated with hospitals in our country.

The institutions that have done some research are CMC in Vellore, Amritha Institute of Medical Sciences in Kochi, St. John's in Manipal. We also know that there is research going on in Kolkata, Goa and Bangalore. One of them is studying the possibility that coconut oil's anti viral capabilities can help HIV+ patients.

H.C: Many refer to the coconut palm as the Kalpavriksham, which is mentioned in ancient Sanskrit texts. What is your take on this?

TKJ: Not a single thing on the coconut tree needs to be wasted. It provides for all aspects of human life – from shelter to physical wellbeing. The pure water that is found in the nut is undoubtedly the best drink in the world in every sense. Communities that have been consuming the flesh of the coconut as part of their native cuisine, have enjoyed better heart health, dental health, digestive health, are generally free from bacterial and fungal infections. If any tree deserves to be called a 'Kalpavriksham', it is definitely the coconut tree – our bounty of goodness.