Nabhan (2008) Diabetes Among Desert Dwellers

Nabhan, Gary Paul


Very good

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Nabhan speaks about the growing problem of adult-onset diabetes in Native Americans, specifically in the US and Mexico. He spends more time speaking about the Seri of Mexico which contains who live in several villages, two of them being the Punta Chueca and the Desemboque. Nabhan first mentions that it is important to determine if the susceptibility of these tribes to diabetes is affected by the heritage of the Seri. He compares individuals that have 100% Seri ancestry against those with some Pima and Papago ancestry (which are known to have the highest frequency of diabetes in the world). Although more than 27% Seri that were examined showed impaired glucose tolerance, a clear sign of adult-onset diabetes, there was no correlation related to ancestry. There was, however, a positive correlation between diabetes and an increase in accultured, modern food in the Seri diet.

Once this was determined, Nabhan went on to analyzing what aspect of the diet was affecting the impaired glucose tolerance. It was not that the Seri were now eating more calories, but the nutritious value contained in these calories was different (quality vs. quantity). After realizing that researchers were spending too much time on figuring out what was worsening the health of the aborigines, Nabhan decided to try to determine what could reduce the diabetes and diseases related to it. After discussions with several people, it seemed that there was a relationship between the susceptibility of desert dwellers and drought-adapted plants in their diet. These plants contained certain characteristics and mechanisms that acted as "protection" against diabetes once ingested by the Native Americans. Since they had been consuming them for 10,000 years, they developed metabolic adaptations to these foods. However, now that their diets are changing it had become maladaptive and the evolutionary process must begin again for them to adapt to these new, Western foods.

Nabhan (2008:376) also addresses several factors that "explain why individuals of European descent appear to be less vulnerable" to diabetes. These four reasons are covered on pages 376-377, and after rereading them several times I honestly don't understand why any of them would lead to a decrease in European susceptibility to this disease. I thought that it would be mostly because the European diet has contained these foods for longer, so our bodies and metabolisms have had longer to adapt, but this wasn't explicitly mentioned. Some indication of the reasons cited by Nabhan would really help me understand your critique!

Nabhan does a great job at assessing all of the factors that go into how these foods could be affecting the susceptibility of the Seri to diabetes. The only aforementioned confusing part in this article could have definitely been cleared up with more explanation. He spends a lot of time assessing every little detail in the beginning of the article, and I feel as if he grew tired of including so much detail towards the end so it becomes more vague and, as a result, more confusing. Other than this, I feel as if he addressed each issue thoroughly and adequately. I couldn't find any underlying assumptions that he missed and would be interested in reading more on this topic.