



Scientist seeks food truth

Nutrition science is so much more than matters of opinion or the latest popular diet hype. Nutrition science is the systematic process of searching for the truth about the roles that food and its components play in our well-being.

Throughout the year, "Health Options" will feature individuals in Hawaii who are world-class scientists in food and nutrition. Often, little is known about them in their own backyard, but their publications have brought national and international recognition to Hawaii.

Dr. Rachel Novotny is professor and chairwoman of the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences in the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Novotny received her masters and doctorate degrees in nutrition from Cornell University. Past research collaboration has extended to Bolivia, Costa

Rico, Ecuador, Nigeria and Indonesia.

Her projects involve collaborating with researchers in the United States, Polynesia and Micronesia on studies that blend biology, medicine, agriculture and anthropology. "Nutritional status is not just what we eat, it's how we live," she says. "It is the combination of physiology, food and culture."

Her main research focus is on how biological and cultural factors influence a person's body size and what that means for long-term health. Hawaii's great ethnic diversity provides a natural laboratory to study these factors. Other research areas: how calcium intake and lifestyle during youth affect the risk of osteoporosis later in life; breastfeeding and infant health; and how the level of fatness affects blood pressure.

One example of how Novotny's research benefits Hawaii is her involvement in

the Healthy Living in the Pacific Islands Initiative. The goals of this Initiative include increasing local food production and consumption to promote self-sustainability, increasing physical activity and increasing educational opportunities throughout the Pacific.

We asked Novotny what she thought people were most confused about regarding nutrition. Her response: "I think it is hard for many people to understand that most medical and nutritional conditions are a result of many factors that are inter-related. Understanding this helps to interpret new findings, that a new finding is likely a new piece of the puzzle, but not a 'magic bullet.' It also helps to explain why as science and knowledge develops, we can see more clearly what leads to health."

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D., C.N.S. and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D., C.N.S.
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service
