HEALTH CORNER

Family History Makes for a Good Story

Common Sense Health – Diana Gifford-Jones

How many of us can recall our grandfathers leaning back in a favourite chair, saying, "Let me tell you something you should remember." What followed was usually a story that had grown larger with time, about hardship, happenstance, or a decision made when the stakes were high.

On the other hand, if your grandmother was anything like one of mine, the stories amounted to a different kind of education. Hers were stories that began with confidence and ended in laughter. "I never worried," she'd say, before describing in detail how she worried about everything. Funny at the time. Instructive in retrospect.

At the turn of a new year, when families gather and time loosens its grip just a little, stories come out naturally. It's a great time of year to be paying closer attention, and perhaps asking for, the stories we haven't heard.

I'm talking about the stories buried in the family tree.

Norman Cousins, the longtime editor of The Saturday Review, remarked, "History is a vast early warning system." It is as true for kings and queens as for each one of us. Royal families once reshaped nations through ignorance of genetic disease. And when inherited risks for disease go unrecognized in our own families, we are missing the chance to avoid them and to change the life course for ourselves and those who follow.

Factual stories are important in the family tree. You may ask, "Could you remind me, how did Uncle Frank die?" To which the response might be, "Oh, a heart attack." Followed by, "No, it was a stroke." And that correction matters. A lot.

Family history remains one of the most powerful predictors of future health problems. Long before genetic tests and predictive algorithms, doctors relied on family stories to identify patterns – heart disease, diabetes, cancer, autoimmune conditions, mental health challenges. And here's the truth: even today, many people walk into a doctor's office with no idea of their family medical history.

That's a mistake. Studies show that people who know their family health history are more likely to get screened earlier, take preventive steps, and give their doctors the information needed to make better decisions. Knowledge doesn't guarantee good health, but ignorance almost guarantees missed opportunities.

Children and grandchildren benefit the most. Understanding health patterns in the family gives them power. "Your grandfather ignored high blood pressure for years, and that's what caught up with him." Knowledge becomes the motivation needed for prevention.

But many families avoid these conversations. They feel awkward. It's too personal. Or people assume "someone else knows." And then the memories fade. Details disappear. And before long, no one remembers who had what, or when.

It need not feel like a medical interrogation. The conversation can start with the spark of a story. "What do you remember about how your father's health changed as he got older?" "I remember great-Aunt so-and-so, but whatever happened to her?"

If you are the source of family knowledge, use the holidays to share what you know. Laughter about good memories can be interspersed with important details about family health history and advice to avoid preventable problems.

If you are the recipient of the stories, let them unfold. Then write things down.

As we edge into a new year, people love to make resolutions: eat better, exercise more, stress less. Fine goals, all of them. But here's another one to consider: resolve to preserve the family story.

How many heart attacks, strokes, or cancers could be delayed – or prevented – if warning signs are recognized earlier? We'll never know. But it's worth a good story.

This column offers opinions on health and wellness, not personal medical advice.

Canadians should thank Trump for targeting supply management

By Gwyn Morgan

Trump is forcing the Canadian government to confront what it has long avoided: an end to supply management. U.S. President Donald Trump's deeply harmful tariff rampage has put the Canada-U.S.-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) under renewed strain. At the centre of that uncertainty is Canada's supply management system, an economically costly and politically protected regime Ottawa has long refused to reform.

Supply management uses quotas and fixed prices for milk, eggs and poultry with the intention of matching supply with demand while restricting imports. Producers need quota in order to produce and sell output legally. Given the thousands of farmers spread across the country, combined with the fact that the quotas are specific to milk, eggs, chickens and turkey, the bureaucracy (and number of bureaucrats) required is huge and extremely costly. Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food 2024-25 transfer payments included $4.8 billion for "Supply Management Initiatives."

The bureaucrats often get it wrong. Canada's most recent chicken production cycle saw one of the worst supply shortfalls in more than 50 years. Preset quota limits stopped farmers from responding to meet demand, leaving consumers with higher grocery bills for 11th-hour imports. The reality is that accurately predicting demand is impossible.

Canada's supply management system faces renewed pressure as Trump targets it in CUSMA negotiations Ottawa tried to keep off-limits Supply management persists for political reasons, not economic ones, and Trump is now exposing that reality. The dysfunction doesn't stop with chicken. Egg imports under the shortage allocation program had already topped 14 million dozen by mid-year. Our trading partners are taking full advantage. Chile, for example, is on track to double chicken exports.

The cost to consumers is considerable. Pre-pandemic research estimates the average Canadian family pays $300 to $444 extra for food as a result of supply management. And since, as a share of their income, lower-income Canadians spend three times as much as middle-income Canadians and almost five times as much as upper-income Canadians, the impact on them is proportionally much greater.

It's no surprise that farmers are anxious to protect their monopoly. In most cases, they have paid hefty sums for their quota. If the price of their product were allowed to fall to free-market levels, the value of their quota would go to zero. In addition, the Dairy Farmers of Canada argue that supply management means "the right amount of food is produced," producers get a "fair return," and import restrictions guarantee access to "homegrown food," all of which is debatable.

All price-fixing systems create problems. Dairy cattle are not machines. A cow's milk production varies. If a farmer gets more milk than his quota, the excess must be dumped. When governments limit the supply of any item, its value always rises. Dairy quotas, by their very nature, have become a valuable commodity, selling for more than $25,000 per "cow equivalent." That means a 100-head dairy farm is worth at least $2,500,000 in quota alone, a value that exists only because of the legislated ability to charge higher-than-market prices.

Dairy isn't the only sector where government-regulated quotas have become very valuable. The West Coast fishery is another. Commercial fishery quotas for salmon and halibut have become valuable commodities worth millions of dollars, completely out of reach for independent fishers, turning them into de facto employees of quota holders.

While of relatively limited national importance, supply management is of major political significance in Quebec. As George Mason University and Montreal Economic Institute economist Vincent Geloso notes, "In 17 ridings provincially, people under supply management are strong enough to change the outcome of the election."

That brings us back to the upcoming CUSMA negotiations. Under CUSMA, the U.S. gets less than five per cent of Canada's agricultural products market. Given that President Trump has been a long-standing critic of supply management, especially in dairy, it's certain to be targeted.

Looking to pre-empt concessions, supply-managed farmer associations lobbied the federal government to pass legislation keeping supply management off the table in any future trade negotiations. This makes voters in those 17 Quebec ridings happy, but it's certain to enrage Trump, starting the CUSMA negotiations off on a decidedly adversarial note. As Concordia University economist Moshe Lander says: "The government seems willing even to accept tariffs and damage to the Canadian economy rather than put dairy supply management on the table."

Parliament can pass whatever laws it likes, but Trump has made it clear that ending supply management, especially in dairy, is one of his main goals in the CUSMA review. It's hard to see how a deal can be made without substantial reform. That will make life difficult for the federal Liberals. But the president will be doing Canadian consumers a big favour.

Taxing food is like slapping a surcharge on hunger - It needs to end

By Sylvain Charlebois

About a year ago, Canada experimented with something rare in federal policymaking: a temporary GST holiday on prepared foods.

It was short-lived and poorly communicated, yet Canadians noticed it immediately. One of the most unavoidable expenses in daily life—food—became marginally less costly.

Families felt a modest but genuine reprieve. Restaurants saw a bump in customer traffic. For a brief moment, Canadians experienced what it feels like when government steps back from taxing something as basic as eating.

Then the tax returned with opportunistic pricing, restoring a policy that quietly but reliably makes the cost of living more expensive for everyone.

In many ways, the temporary GST cut was worse than doing nothing. It opened the door for industry to adjust prices upward while consumers were distracted by the tax relief. That dynamic helped push our food inflation rate from minus 0.6 per cent in January to almost four per cent later in the year. By tinkering with taxes rather than addressing the structural flaws in the system, policymakers unintentionally fuelled volatility. Instead of experimenting with temporary fixes, it is time to confront the obvious: Canada should stop taxing food altogether.

Canadians are paying more as GST/HST lifts food prices and adds pressure at the till. Cutting the food tax is one clear way to ease rising costs Shrinkflation leads to more grocery items becoming subject to GST/HST. Start with grocery stores. Many Canadians believe food is not taxed at retail, but that assumption is wrong. While "basic groceries" are zero-rated, a vast range of everyday food products are taxed, and Canadians now pay over a billion dollars a year in GST/HST on food purchased in grocery stores.

That amount is rising steadily, not because Canadians are buying more treats, but because shrinkflation is quietly pulling more products into taxable categories. A box of granola bars with six bars is tax-exempt, but when manufacturers quietly reduce the box to five bars, it becomes taxable. The product hasn't changed. The nutritional profile hasn't changed. Only the packaging has changed, yet the tax flips on. This pattern now permeates the grocery aisle. A 650-gram bag of chips shrinks to 580 grams and becomes taxable. Muffins once sold in six-packs are reformatted into three-packs or individually wrapped portions, instantly becoming taxable single-serve items. Yogurt, traditionally sold in large tax-exempt tubs, increasingly appears in smaller 100-gram units that meet the definition of taxable snacks. Crackers, cookies, trail mixes and cereals have all seen slight weight reductions that push them past GST thresholds created decades ago. Inflation raises food prices; Canada's outdated tax code amplifies those increases.

At the same time, grocery inflation remains elevated. Prices are rising at 3.4 per cent, nearly double the overall inflation rate. At a moment when food costs are climbing faster than almost everything else, continuing to tax food—whether on the shelf or in restaurants—makes even less economic sense. The inconsistencies extend further. A steak purchased at the grocery store carries no tax, yet a breakfast wrap made from virtually the same inputs is taxed at five per cent GST plus applicable HST. The nutritional function is not different. The economic function is not different. But the tax treatment is entirely arbitrary, rooted in outdated distinctions that no longer reflect how Canadians live or work. Lower-income households disproportionately bear the cost. They spend 6.2 per cent of their income eating outside the home, compared with 3.4 per cent for the highest-income households. When government taxes prepared food, it effectively imposes a higher burden on those often juggling two or three jobs with limited time to cook.

But this is not only about the poorest households. Every Canadian pays more because the tax embeds itself in the price of convenience, time and the realities of modern living.

And there is an overlooked economic dimension: restaurants are one of the most effective tools we have for stimulating community-level economic activity. When people dine out, they don't just buy food. They participate in the economy. They support jobs for young and lower-income workers. They activate foot traffic in commercial areas. They drive spending in adjacent sectors such as transportation, retail, entertainment and tourism.

A healthy restaurant sector is a signal of economic confidence; it is often the first place consumers re-engage when they feel financially secure. Taxing prepared food, therefore, is not simply a tax on convenience—it is a tax on economic participation.

Restaurants Canada has been calling for the permanent removal of GST/HST on all food, and they are right. Eliminating the tax would generate $5.4 billion in consumer savings annually, create more than 64,000 foodservice jobs, add over 15,000 jobs in related sectors and support the opening of more than 2,600 new restaurants across the country. No other affordability measure available to the federal government delivers this combination of economic stimulus and direct relief. And Canadians overwhelmingly agree. Eighty-four per cent believe food should not be taxed, regardless of where it is purchased. In a polarized political climate, a consensus of that magnitude is rare. Ending the GST/HST on all food will not solve every affordability issue but it is one of the simplest, fairest and most effective measures the federal government can take immediately. Food is food. The tax system should finally accept that.

The restaurant sector is shrinking under rising costs, thinning margins and closures delayed by pandemic-era support According to official figures, Canada's restaurant sector appears remarkably resilient. The number of food service establishments has climbed steadily since the pandemic, surpassing pre-2020 levels and suggesting a sector that has not only recovered, but expanded. On paper, the industry looks stable.

Based on current cost trajectories, balance-sheet conditions, and consumer behaviour, we expect Canada to lose roughly 4,000 restaurants on a net basis in 2026. This adjustment is already underway, even if it is not yet visible in headline statistics. The lived reality of Canada's restaurant economy tells a very different story, one defined by margin compression, rising fixed costs, softening demand, and mounting financial fatigue. Speak with operators, suppliers, landlords, insurers or lenders and a consistent picture emerges: closures are accelerating, balance sheets are deteriorating, and survival increasingly depends on short-term coping strategies rather than long-term viability.

The problem is not that restaurants are failing suddenly. It is that the sector has been operating in a prolonged state of economic stress since 2021, masked temporarily by extraordinary policy interventions. Pandemic-era supports, including wage subsidies, rent relief, loan deferrals and tax postponements, kept thousands of establishments afloat long after their underlying cost structures had become misaligned with market conditions. These measures were effective at preventing an immediate collapse, but they also delayed the necessary adjustment.

The restaurant business model has fundamentally shifted. Labour costs are structurally higher and unlikely to reverse. Commercial rents are resetting upward just as consumer traffic weakens. Insurance, utilities, compliance and financing costs continue to rise. At the same time, Canadians are eating out less frequently and spending more cautiously when they do. Restaurants remain price takers in this environment, squeezed between rising input costs and demand that is increasingly price-sensitive. Critically, one of the industry's most reliable margin levers is also eroding: alcohol sales. Canadians are drinking less alcohol overall, driven by higher prices, health considerations and changing social norms. For restaurants, this shift is consequential. Alcohol—particularly beer, wine and spirits—has historically subsidized food margins. As alcohol volumes decline, operators lose one of the few high-margin categories capable of offsetting rising kitchen and labour costs. Replacing those margins through food alone is economically difficult in a consumer environment already resistant to further price increases.

Menu price inflation, often misinterpreted as a sign of pricing power, is in fact a symptom of distress. Operators are raising prices to slow losses, not to expand margins. Many are surviving by drawing down savings, refinancing debt, renegotiating leases or delaying reinvestment. These are not indicators of health; they are indicators of exhaustion.

Business closures do not occur when conditions deteriorate; they occur when resilience is depleted. Owners exhaust personal capital, restructure debt and postpone difficult decisions in the hope that conditions improve. For many restaurants, that hope carried them through 2023 and 2024. By 2026, the arithmetic becomes unavoidable. Pandemic-era loans mature, deferred liabilities crystallize and margins that were already thin turn negative. The losses will not be evenly distributed. Independent restaurants—those without scale, brand leverage or balance-sheet flexibility—are likely to absorb the majority of the contraction. These businesses are also among the sector's most important contributors to food innovation and culinary artistry. They are often the first to experiment, the first to take risks and the first to introduce Canadians to new cuisines, flavours and dining concepts that later become mainstream.

Their disappearance would represent more than an economic correction. It would narrow Canada's culinary landscape, reduce experimentation and weaken the ecosystem that allows food culture to evolve at the neighbourhood level.

Official statistics will eventually reflect this contraction, but only after the fact. Establishment counts are inherently backward-looking, particularly in sectors dominated by small and independently owned businesses. By the time the decline becomes visible in aggregate data, thousands of operators will already have exited the market. The greater risk is not statistical lag, but policy misinterpretation. Headline growth figures can create a false sense of stability, leading policymakers to underestimate the urgency of reform, whether in labour policy, commercial leasing, taxation or regulatory burden. Confusing administrative survival with economic viability risks leaving the sector without the tools it needs to adapt.

The restaurant sector is not collapsing overnight. It is contracting quietly, unevenly and structurally. The warning signs are already visible for those willing to look beyond topline counts and focus on fundamentals.

By 2026, the data will catch up to the economics. Unfortunately, many of Canada's most creative and culturally important restaurants will not.