

How Shopping Carts May Be Our Greatest Weapon in the Health Care Fight

By Robyn O'Brien, AlterNet

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"The less we spend on food, the more we spend on health care," said [Michael Pollan](#) on Oprah.

Today, Americans spend almost 20 cents of every dollar managing disease -- diabetes, [allergies](#), asthma, cancer, obesity -- and only 10 cents of every dollar on food.

The jury is still out on what exactly may be causing all of these epidemics, but genetics don't change that quickly, the environment does. And increasing evidence points to the role that diet is playing in the onset of disease.

In a perfect world, we'd all be growing our own organic vegetable garden, but most of us don't yet live in that world. With picky eaters, limited time and a limited budget, we are trying to do the best we can with what we've got and are frustrated by the price discrepancy between conventional food and "organic" food at the grocery store.

But have you ever wondered why organic food costs more?

Organic food costs more than its conventional counterparts because our taxpayer dollars are not used to support organic farms to the same extent that our dollars are used to support conventional farms. [Under our current system](#), it is more profitable for farmers to grow crops laced with chemicals than organic ones because they will receive larger government handouts from the [USDA Farm Subsidy](#) program, more marketing assistance and stronger crop insurance programs.

If farmers do choose to grow organic crops, it costs them more because not only do they not receive the same level of financial handouts from the government, but they are also charged a fee to prove that their crops are safe and then on top of that, they are then charged a fee to label their crops as "organic." As a result, organic farmers have a higher cost structure -- with added fees and expenditures required to bring their products to market -- while our taxpayer dollars are used to subsidize the crops with the chemicals.

Wouldn't it make more sense to use our taxpayer dollars to subsidize the crops without chemicals given the increasing evidence pointing to the impact that these environmental insults are having on our health? What if our most powerful weapon in the war on health care is a farm subsidy?

[Health care reform could begin at the USDA](#), with an equal allocation of our taxpayer dollars between organic and conventional farming. The USDA could continue health care reform by providing equivalent marketing assistance and crop insurance programs for organic crops and by eliminating the organic certification fee farmers are required to pay in order to label their crops as "USDA Organic."

If we invite the [US Department of Agriculture](#) to be part of health care reform, the USDA could level the economic playing field for the farmers, enabling more farms to grow crops free of chemicals, synthetic and genetically engineered ingredients which would, in turn, increase the supply of these crops in the marketplace -- which, as any good economist knows, would drive down costs. Organic food would be more affordable to more of us.

Safe food is a social justice issue that our taxpayer dollars could be used to support. Perhaps it's time to invite the USDA into the health care debate and address the current system under which our taxpayer dollars are being used to externalize the costs of these chemicals onto the health of our families. With the USDA at the table, health care reform could begin on the farm allowing the [most powerful weapon in the health care](#) debate to be a grocery cart.

Robyn O'Brien is founder of [AllergyKids Foundation](#) and author of the book, [The Unhealthy Truth: How Our Food Is Making Us Sick and What We Can Do About It](#).