



SLOWING DOWN

Dr. Claire Badaracco examines the intersection of slow food, slow medicine and mass media

By Tim Cigelske | Illustration by Chris Neal

You're only as healthy as the messages from the media that you consume.

That's the focus of Dr. Claire Badaracco's research of the impact of advertising, public relations and mass media on perception of personal wellness and sickness for the "worried well" — those who have media-induced anxiety about disease. Increasingly, consumers have the choice to receive news from alternative sources that advocate lifestyles embracing what's being called slow food and slow medicine.

"What was once a fringe movement is rapidly becoming mainstream," says Badaracco, a Marquette professor of public relations who studies the intersection of media, religion and health communication. Her books include *Prescribing Faith: Medicine, Media and Religion in American Culture* and *Quoting God: How Media Shape Ideas About Religion*.

Traditionally, Badaracco says, people have defined themselves in a larger social context through mediaization — or messages about the self received through the media. This has often led people who are otherwise healthy to become sick after constantly hearing about the dangers of diseases, unhealthy lifestyles and aging, she says.

She cites research showing that anxiety — which causes the flight or fight response — triggers cortisol in the brain. This sets off a domino effect of neurotransmitters responsible for many chronic ailments, which feeds into a vicious cycle of media messages, illness and medication.

"Anxiety and fear appeals are the staples of the news media, and fear appeals to illness and aging are essential to the designs of advertisements," Badaracco says.

In contrast, the slow food movement, which began in Italy, describes itself as an eco-gastronomic movement committed to biodiversity and the awareness of the culture of food and its relationship to the community. Slow medicine is the clinical, applied approach to the science of nutrition, health and healing, as opposed to "fast" cures that focus on pharmaceutical fixes. Consumers can increasingly find messages about slow food and slow medicine in the media with best-selling books such as Michael Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* and Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. They may also hear from well-known alternative health advocates such

as Andrew Weil.

"The size of this sector is estimated at approximately \$220 billion and growing," Badaracco says. "This demonstrates the number of people whose understanding has led them to seek health in a balanced way."

She became interested in slow food and medicine through continuing education at Harvard University's Mind/Body Medicine Institute and while teaching the course Cultural Identity, Media and World Religions at Marquette. One of her classes videoconferenced with Dr. Harold Koenig of Duke University, who is known for integrating faith in traditional medical training at leading universities.

Badaracco became interested in the role faith plays in healing, and she sees a strong spiritual component to the slow food and slow medicine movement as well. She sees that message continuing to spread.

"It would seem that physicians are better educated about how religion and health must be considered as part of the patient's history in treatment and wellness evaluation," Badaracco says.

