Dieting anno 1863 – and 2010?

We are inundated with self-help books about losing weight. This is by no means a new phenomenon – the first bestseller appeared as early as 1863. At that time, dieting proved to be a controversial topic and continues to stir emotions to this day.

We might like to think that dieting is a novel invention. However, such an assertion would be far from accurate. The phenomenon has been described in great detail for as long as writers have observed people’s concerns as well as illustrations of the topics that are likely to have the greatest earning power. In most instances these represent two sides of the same coin. A bookshop is a good example of the commercial market’s self-regulating mechanisms. And given that everything between two covers can pass as literature, books guiding us on our path to a narrower waist exemplify a literary genre that takes up ever-increasing shelf-space. Titles, some of which we do not even want to mention, with their implications and treatments were being recorded (1). While Hippocrates’ colleagues referred their inquiries to their fellow-men might not then descend into premature graves, as I believe many do, from what is termed apoplexy, and certainly would not, during their sojourn on earth, endure so much bodily and consequently mental infirmity» (6).

New eating habits
Numerous attempts were made to lose the excess weight. Banting’s doctors proposed different approaches ranging from the benefits of a coastal climate and natural springs to physical activity. One doctor recommended rowing and Banting followed this advice and could be observed exercising on the river several times a week. His muscular strength grew, but so did his appetite and weight. As Banting approached his mid-sixties, his hearing began to deteriorate. Banting consulted yet another doctor, Dr. Harvey, and according to Banting the doctor finally began to appreciate the inter-relatedness of his health problems. Harvey prescribed a diet that in itself was intended to lead to weight loss and the relief of problems such as stiff joints and umbilical hernia, as well as improving his hearing.

The solution was a diet low on sugar and starch. He reduced his intake of bread, beer and potatoes in favour of a diet that he himself describes as pure luxury. For breakfast he ate 170 g of meat or fish, a biscuit or some toast. Dinner (at 2pm) resembled breakfast, but with the addition of vegetables grown above ground as well as a little fruit. Dinner was enjoyed accompanied by two or three glasses of a light red wine, sherry or madeira. At tea time he had cooked fruits, a couple of biscuits and, of course, tea without sugar. Supper consisted of 100 g of meat or fish, one or two glasses of red wine (or sherry), and before going to bed he indulged in a nightcap consisting of a couple of glasses of wine or a glass of spirits.

Nonetheless, Banting was not all together freed from temptation: «Being fond of green peas, I take them daily in the season, and I gain 2 or 3 lbs. I soon lose both when their season is over. «Being fond of green peas, I take them together freed from temptation:» (6) Being highly motivated, Banting complied with the medical advice and registered the changes in his weight during the ensuing period. He lost 50 lbs, from a BMI of 34 kg/m², the definition of obesity in WHO’s index (7), and for several years his BMI hovered around 25 kg/m², the upper limit for normal weight. His waistline shrunk by altogether 13 inches.

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It showed that he had donated the profit to various hospitals and institutions for the needy, making Banting one of the major benefactors of his time.

The preface to the fourth edition dwells on the criticism to which he was subjected. The arguments ranged from mere rumour to highly critical articles published in medical journals. The criticism dealt with all aspects of Banting’s work, including who should be credited with inventing the diet (9, 10), and the impropriety of a layman busying himself with medical literature:

«We advise Mr. Banting, and everyone of his kind, not to meddle with medical literature again, but be content to mind his own business.» (9)

In light of our own era’s increasingly detailed knowledge of the physiology of obesity, we may regard The Lancet’s claim in 1864 that «the professional literature about corpulence is tolerably complete» (9) as somewhat premature. However, the following characterisation of fat people appearing in the journal could have also been written by contemporary clinicians: «…the fact that few fat people possess any great power of self-denial or much physical energy. So they give a day or two to the diet, and then drift back to the sweets of life» (9). It was only in the 1930s that medical journals began in earnest to examine overweight and obesity in a more critical light (11).

Another type of criticism centred on the health risks posed by the diet itself. The British Medical Journal cited the fate of a High Court justice in a bid to warn the public. This is a revealing account of people’s views on obesity at the time.

«Mr. Justice Williams is at last pronounced out of danger. For weeks he has been hovering between life and death. It is to be hoped that those of our readers who are tempted to try the effect of the Banting system to reduce that obesity which nature has given them will think a little of Mr. Justice Williams before adopting it, for it is certain that the serious illness of the learned judge was occasioned by the use of Bantingism.» (12) (Text highlighted by the author of this article)

However, Banting gained the support of a few doctors. In 1870 the book On Diet and the Regimen in Sickness and Health (13) was published, in which Dr. Dobell dealt with the criticism of Banting: «Mr. Banting has done a great deal more good than harm. He has not brought forward a single new fact or new idea, but he has had the luck, by zealously advertising a striking case of the effects of a plan of treatment long familiar to every medical man who understood physiology, to convince the public of the immense influence on the animal organism of modifications in the quality of food – an influence in the importance of which they did not half believe when urged upon them in the form of medical advice.»

From Banting to Atkins

There were several aspects of Banting’s success that could be seen as problematic. There were concerns about recommending one kind of diet, and the fact that Banding himself had no medical background did not improve the situation. What proved to be even less palatable was the realization, according to Dobell, that Banting tended to communicate with ordinary people in a manner quite foreign to doctors. This was largely due to the fact that he shared his own personal experiences. For this very reason his Letter on Corpulence became a literary innovation in the shape of a self-biographical book on weight-loss.

Not everyone has the privilege of being immortalised in the form of an eponym. «Banting» was taken up in the English language and became synonymous with «dieting». The word is derived from the name of the undertaker William Banting, and not from Sir Frederick Banting whose discovery of insulin represents a more important milestone in the history of medicine. The word made its way into the Swedish language through words like «att banta» (to diet) and «bantning» (dieting). These are words unfamiliar to Norwegians. «Banting» was a household name in England as early as the beginning of the 1860s, and came to represent a low carbohydrate diet.

Ever since, diets have continued to be promoted by people who have experienced their effects. With a total of 45 million sold copies of his book, Dr Atkins has come to overshadow William Banting. The long-term effects of the diet on health and weight are still a topic of discussion in medical journals, and it is interesting to note that The Lancet has been the setting for such discussions right from the time of Banting up to the present day (9, 14).

William Banting died at the age of 81.

Conflicts of interest: None

References

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