

LONDON LETTER

Extracts

NEW GUIDELINES TO DIET, WEIGHT AND EXERCISE

As Britons try to slim for their health's sake, there's good news from the doctors' trade union, the British Medical Association. Overweight men and tubby ladies can relax a bit, for it seems the dangers of being overweight have been exaggerated - and that's official. Here's a report from BBC World Service:

For most women there's no appreciable risk from being overweight until they're 30% over the recommended weight for their height, says Dr. Denis Craddock, author of the BMA's new Slimmer's Guide. For men the figure is 25%. So, if you are middle aged and are 10-15 kg overweight, that's not going to do you much harm. A tendency to being overweight is usually inherited anyway. But if you have medical symptoms from being overweight, that's another matter. Go to your doctor.

Diet, not weight, is what matters, says Dr. Craddock, who is a member of the UK Royal College of Physicians' working party on obesity. Of course, if you're massively overweight, 20 or more kg, then weight alone does begin to create major health problems. But for most people in the West at least, what matters is not so much weight as the fact that most people eat too much and take too little exercise.

The BMA Slimmer's Guide warns of the dangers of eating too much sugar and sweet foods and too much animal fat in fatty meat, butter, fatty cheeses and cream. It speaks of the benefits of lean meat, white fish, fresh undercooked vegetables and salads. It points out that there is no need to drink any milk at all, and that no more than four eggs a week should be eaten because of their high cholesterol content. Following these recommendations can prevent obesity developing in children as well as adults.

Some more surprising proposals are put forward. Scrap low carbohydrate diets, says Dr. Craddock. More than half the world's population stays thin on a diet consisting mainly of healthy, natural unrefined carbohydrates. Reasonable consumption of wholemeal bread and potatoes is good for you even on a slimming diet, so long as you avoid frying them in fat or oil.

Avoid crash diets, and the longer-term moderate dieting. And scrap low-energy diets or less than 3350 kilojoules (800 calories) per day, unless you're in hospital care. Below 3350 kilojoules daily many people start to burn up the muscle in their bodies to keep going and this can lead to dangerously harmful weakness.

There's specific advice to each sex. For men, avoid lavish hospitality in business lunches. Long distance commuters with sedentary jobs are in danger of severe lack of exercise. Run up the stairs at work, don't use the lift. Take up sports; squash, tennis, badminton, sailing. Reduce the size of your social drinks.

Women are helped to slim by social pressures, indeed some feminists think there's much too much pressure on them to do so. But, says Dr. Craddock, the housewives' way of life may lead into even more temptation to overeat unhealthy foods than the man at work.

The secret of healthy slimming lies in identifying the sort of eater you are, and then taking specific measures to deal with your specific problem. For instance, the nervous nibbler who empties a tin of biscuits without noticing has a different problem to tackle than the business luncher. He also describes tests any of us can do to see if we need to slim and how successful we are likely to be.

Dieters should frequently carry out a 'skin pinch' test. Grab a fold of flesh from the waistline between thumb and finger. If the fold measures more than 2–5 cms across, reduce your intake of fattening foods.

Most of the booklet is concerned with Western diets. But there's also a section on other diets. Indians are advised to avoid frying with oil as much as possible, especially in making curries. Chapatis should be made without fat and no fat should be used as a spread. Ghee (clarified butter) contains more calories than butter; brown rice should be used in preference to white, and dalls (lentils) are good sources of protein. West Indians are advised that mixed vegetable soup with rice is a good slimming meal, to use brown rice, to boil rather than fry plantains, and to eat lots of green and red peppers which are full of vitamins and very low in calories.

50 YEARS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

Alcoholism is a growing problem worldwide. Alcoholics Anonymous, the largest and most famous international organisation which specialises in fighting the problem recently reached its 50th anniversary. BBC World Service has been finding out about the organisation.

'My name is John and I am an alcoholic

This famous opening line is how alcoholics attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings have traditionally introduced themselves ever since AA was founded. Anonymity is the keyword, with first names only. Everyone present is either an alcoholic or a reformed alcoholic, and anyone can go along. They only criterion for membership is that you must want to give up drinking. And because the underlying belief is that 'once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic', members often continue to attend meetings even through they've technically long ago beaten the habit.

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in the United States by a New York stockbroker and an Ohio surgeon, both of whom wanted first to conquer their own drink problems and then to help others, using the experience they had gained. Since then, membership of AA has increased at a rate of about 10 per cent a year.

Today there are well over a million members forming about 28,000 groups in more than 100

different countries. All those different groups are autonomous. Members are taught not to feel guilt, to set themselves small goals at a time and to build up their self-esteem, and there's a strong religious basis to the whole AA programme.

In Britain - which comes 21st among the industrialised nations where the consumption of alcohol is concerned - there are just over 2,000 AA branches with between 30,000 and 35,000 members. There are more women than there used to be, and more young people too, though the average age of members is about 40. All these people have come to recognise themselves as alcoholics. But as the Government funded voluntary organisation Alcohol Concern pointed out today, recognised alcoholics are only a small part of the overall problem. Alcohol Concern estimates that there are up to one million people in Britain who are really dependent on alcohol - and they cite statistics which demonstrate that, like many other countries, Britain has a growing drink problem.

For example, in the past ten years alone, women's alcoholic consumption has doubled; and deaths from cirrhosis of the liver have increased by almost two-thirds. A third of all domestic accidents are connected with alcohol, says Alcohol Concern; so are a third of all cases of child abuse; and two-thirds of suicide attempts and deaths from suicide. One in five of all patients admitted to hospital have alcohol-related illnesses or disabilities. As a nation, alcohol abuse could cost as much as £1,000 million a year. That's the estimated cost of things like treating alcoholic patients in hospital, road accidents, alcohol-related crimes, and the loss of industrial production through workers and managers drinking too much.

There's no less shame attached to heavy drinking now, says Alcohol Concern, than there was half a century ago when AA was founded. Yet advertisers spend some £100 million each year persuading potential customers that different types of alcoholic drinks are glamorous and sexy.

And in television soap operas, the negative aspects of what is all too often a highly dangerous social habit are rarely portrayed. While society continues to maintain a double standard, the work of organisations like Alcoholics Anonymous can only increase. Only, these days, it's almost as likely to be 'My name is Mary and I am an alcoholic.....'