

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.

Magnus Strømmen

magnus-s@online.no

Department of Neuroscience

Faculty of Medicine

Norwegian University of Science and Technology

7491 Trondheim

and

Centre for Obesity

Department of Surgery

St. Olavs University Hospital

Bård Kulseng

Centre for Obesity

St. Olavs hospital

Books on display in bookshops are a reflection of 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, raise our hopes of achieving a flatter stomach, and come with a promise of the ultimate shortcuts to weight-loss for an audience left believing that they can continue to gorge ad libitum.

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 overweight people. In antiquity, obesity with its implications and treatments were being recorded (1). While Hippocrates' colleagues referred their inquiries to scholars, self-help books are a more recent remedy.

But how recent? What could be regarded as the first book on dieting was a pamphlet published in 1863 entitled *Letter on Corpulence, Addressed to the Public* (2). The author was William Banting, a rather plump Englishman who himself had experienced the bodily impacts of obesity. The pamphlet immediately stirred a discussion in medical

journals (3) and was soon translated into a number of languages. A Swedish version was published in 1866 (4). Banting did not have a medical background. Living in Victorian London he ran a successful business that picked up where the doctors left off – the funeral business. As he grew older he began piling on weight in spite of his having a reportedly very active lifestyle.

Over the course of several decades Banting consulted a variety of doctors for medical advice on ailments that were secondary to the obesity without receiving any help to solve the underlying problem. This occurred at a time when doctors just as readily emphasised the favourable effects of obesity as the negative effects, and in reaction to Banting's publication, Doctor Edward Smith published a pamphlet entitled «How to get Fat, or the Means of Preserving the Medium between Leanness and Obesity» (5). Banting's frustration over the lack of knowledge among doctors, as well as his own understanding of the consequences of obesity are clearly expressed in his own writing:

«Oh! that the faculty would look deeper into, and make themselves better acquainted with, the crying evil of obesity – that dreadful tormenting parasite on health and comfort. 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 teatime 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. in weight as well as some little in bulk, but I soon lose both when their season is over. For this trespass I quite forgive myself.» (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.

Rumours and opposition

This was a real money-spinner. While Banting's first two editions were distributed at no charge, he received payment for the third edition, earning a total of £ 969 (6), which would amount to just under £ 616 000 (8) in today's money – a substantial sum for a relatively small pamphlet. As might be expected, he was accused of profiting from people's misery. For this very reason, and in a display of his integrity he gave a comprehensive account of every shilling he had earned in the fourth edition of his pamphlet.

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

«His muscular strength grew, but so did his appetite and weight.»

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 for-



Illustration Stein Løken

ward 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 Banting 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

1. Christopoulou-Aletra H, Papavramidou N. Methods used by the hippocratic physicians for weight reduction. *World J Surg* 2004; 28: 513–7.
2. Banting W. Letter on corpulence, addressed to the public. London: Harrison, 1863.
3. Anonymous. A cure for corpulence. *BMJ* 1864; 1: 99–100.
4. Edholm E. Bantings kur mot korpulens [Banting's cure for corpulence]. Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1866.
5. Gilman SL. Obesity and diet in the nineteenth century: Framing Verdi and Boito's Healthy Falstaff. *University of Toronto Quarterly* 2005; 74: 759–75.
6. Banting W. Letter on corpulence, addressed to the public. 4 edition. London: Harrison, 1869.

>>>

7. WHO. Obesity. Preventing and managing the global epidemic. Report no. 894. Geneva: WHO, 2000.
8. Measuring worth. www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare (20 October 2010).
9. Anonymous. Bantingism. *Lancet* 1864; 1: 520.
10. Harvey J. To the Editor of *The Lancet*. *Lancet* 1864; 1: 571.
11. Zweiniger-Bargielowska I. The culture of the abdomen: Obesity and reducing in Britain, circa 1900–1939. *Journal of British Studies* 2005; 44: 239–73.
12. Anonymous. Bantingism. *BMJ* 1864; 1: 345.
13. Dobell HB. On diet and regimen in sickness and health. London: H. K. Lewis, 1872.
14. Astrup A, Larsen TM, Harper A. Atkins and other low-carbohydrate diets: hoax or an effective tool for weight loss? *Lancet* 2004; 364: 897–9.

*The manuscript was received on 11 August 2010
and approved on 23 September 2010.*

Medical editor: Jon Amund Kyte.