



Features

Chroniques

Laura Brydges Szabo, a registered dietitian and 1996 graduate of the University of Western Ontario's School of Journalism, lives in Innerkip, Ont. This article won CMAJ's 1996 Amy Chouinard Memorial Essay Contest.

Can Med Assoc J 1997;156:1454-5

The health risks of new-wave vegetarianism

Laura Brydges Szabo, MA, RD

In brief

MANY YOUNG PEOPLE CALL THEMSELVES VEGETARIANS because they don't eat meat, but the eating style they are adopting is fraught with health risks. In this article, which won CMAJ's 1996 Amy Chouinard Memorial Essay Contest for Canadian journalism students, Laura Brydges Szabo looks at the "new vegetarianism" and the recommendations health care professionals are making to young people intent on following this incomplete diet. The contest encourages journalism students to write on health care topics.

En bref

BEAUCOUP DE JEUNES SE DISENT VÉGÉTARIENS parce qu'ils ne mangent pas de viande, mais leur façon de s'alimenter est très risquée pour la santé. Dans cet article, qui s'est mérité le Prix commémoratif Amy Chouinard de rédaction pour 1996 décerné aux étudiants en journalisme du Canada, Laura Brydges Szabo analyse le «nouveau végétarisme» et les recommandations que les professionnels de la santé formulent aux jeunes déterminés à adopter cette alimentation incomplète. Le concours encourage les étudiants en journalisme à écrire sur des sujets liés aux soins de santé.

They call themselves vegetarians because they don't eat meat, but the food style many young adults are adopting might be better described as "vegetarianism by default."

Some see it as a way to cope with shrinking time and budgets, while others consider it the socially acceptable way to lose weight. Regardless of its beginnings, however, new vegetarianism follows a simple pattern. First, red meats are rejected. Then, as time and convenience take priority, chicken is permanently plucked from the diet. Coping with the demands of their newfound independence, young adults are making these types of arbitrary decisions about their diet — and their health.

Amy Herskowitz, an energetic 22-year-old, hasn't eaten red meat in more than 2 years or chicken in more than a year, and she hasn't missed them. Her vegetarianism started in her first year at university when she was living in a campus residence and grew to hate the "mystery meats" in the residence cafeteria. Now that she lives on her own, she continues to avoid meat. "It's too expensive to buy," she says.

For Herskowitz this style of eating did not, initially, involve a choice to be vegetarian — it was a way to save time and money and control her weight. Yet while she enjoys being labelled vegetarian, her motivations sometimes embarrass her. "I feel like a letdown for the people who are really in it for the political causes, like for animal rights or for healthy lifestyle."

Regardless of the reasons behind the choice, dropping meat is a risky way to manage any diet. Although many people think the risk posed by a vegetarian diet lies in a lack of protein, nutritionist Ursula Donovan points out: "Protein takes a second seat in North America to minerals and energy [calories]."

There are plenty of protein sources other than meat in our diets, she explained, but without the traditional mixing of foods new vegetarians who drop meat from their diet may not eat enough food, and therefore not get enough nutrients.

Christine Trankner shares Donovan's concerns. Through her work as a dietitian



ian in London, Ont., Trankner has become worried about the long-term effects of potentially imbalanced diets. New vegetarians tell her they eat a lot of fruits, vegetables, breads and cereals — but nothing else. Yet without milk products to provide calcium, osteoporosis can develop prematurely. Furthermore, general malnutrition from a poorly balanced diet can cause anemia, fatigue and poor wound healing.

Donovan acknowledges that much of the world has been following vegetarian diets without health problems. However, her research at Ontario's University of Guelph shows that young women who are practising new vegetarianism suffer poor iron and zinc status more frequently than traditional vegetarians and omnivores. Herskowitz herself recalls the health problems she developed because of her eating patterns. After eliminating all meat from her diet, she started feeling tired and was unable to exercise and study. Since then she has come to terms with the risks of her default diet, saying flatly, "I know better now."

She has learned to focus on the nutritional value of her diet, something Trankner believes every new vegetarian should do. Using a computerized nutrient analysis system, Trankner evaluates the foods her clients are eating and then identifies what they could change to maximize their diet's nutritional value. By reviewing low-budget recipes that can be prepared quickly, Trankner helps busy vegetarians improve their nutrition with little extra effort or cost. Her most common suggestions are to add tofu, dried beans and peas, and dairy products.

There are proven health benefits associated with vegetarianism. They include a diet with plenty of plants and dietary fibre, which can help prevent bowel problems, and a reduced fat intake that may lower the risk of heart disease and some types of cancer. "But," says Trankner, "veg-

etarianism is not necessarily low fat. You have to look at how it's all put together."

Donovan agrees. "Vegetarianism has no advantage over a healthy omnivorous or mixed diet, unless it is carefully planned. . . . It's not a hard diet to follow," she says, adding that "it is a thoughtful one." Her suggestions to new vegetarians include advice to eat salads with plenty of nutrient-rich greens such as romaine lettuce, kale and spinach, which add important nutrients such as folic acid to the diet.

She also advises that they have fruit or orange juice with meals because vitamin C changes iron in foods from a type that is inefficiently absorbed to a type that the body absorbs more easily. And because tea, coffee and chocolate contain compounds that bind to zinc in foods, she recommends eating and drinking these between meals instead of with meals. This simple

change will leave the zinc in mealtime food available for absorption.

Although Herskowitz knows that her current diet could still be improved, she now plans her meals and includes more nuts, beans, lentils and chick peas. Speaking from her own experiences, she believes that people should examine any diet changes they are planning. "I get nervous when people start getting all hyped up about fads and trends — especially when it comes to their eating habits."

She recommends that new vegetarians inform their physician about changes in their diet so that any health problems that may arise can be more easily identified. She also suggests new vegetarians see a registered dietitian so that they get off to a healthy start — something she didn't do herself.

"A lot of people think vegetarianism is the be-all and end-all," she says, "but it's not. It's just a choice."

To avoid defaulting when making that choice, she advises: "Do it, but do it intelligently." ?

**"A lot of people think
vegetarianism is the be-all and
end-all, but it's not. It's just a
choice."**
