

## MILK AND CANCER

*RALPH RYDER*

Could milk be a cause of cancer? We all know that cancer is linked with diet. Now a controversial theory singles out dairy products as a possible trigger. Food was the last thing on Amanda Myer's mind when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer four years ago, at the age of 43. "I was already eating what I considered to be a healthy, balanced diet and didn't see any need to change it. I'd read somewhere that kiwi fruit contained lots of antioxidants, so I'd have one every day, and I think I started buying organic milk. But that was as far as it went."

A year later, after the cancer had cleared and then returned, it was a different story. "It was a question of, ah, how am I going to get out of this scrape," she recalls. "I was lucky to be receiving excellent medical treatment, but I felt I needed something extra, that this time I really had to find a way to help myself."

Before she even underwent further hospital treatment, she took her sister's advice and went on a residential course at Bristol Cancer Help Centre (BCHC), the holistic charity that has pioneered physical, spiritual and emotional support for people with cancer. Now recovered, she was told by her consultant last month that she was his "fittest patient". And she puts her health status down to the Centre's supportive counselling, to learning relaxation and visualisation techniques - and, above all, to finding out what to eat and what not to eat to stop her cancer recurring.

From its beginnings, BCHC has been associated with the provision of nutritional advice - in the early years, promoting the faddish Bristol Diet, involving much juicing and regular coffee enemas. More recently, however, it has brought together the growing mass of evidence showing, for instance, the link between diet, obesity and cancer. Now, however, it is edging towards controversy again by taking on one of the most contentious issues in nutrition today.

Last month, the centre invited the eminent scientist Professor Jane Plant MBE, bestselling author of *Your Life in Your Hands - Understanding, Preventing and Overcoming Breast Cancer* (Virgin Books), to address an audience of scientists, doctors and policy-makers at a keynote lecture on diet and

cancer. The specific aim of the event was to spark a debate over whether dairy food should carry a health warning in relation to specific cancers.

Professor Plant's war against dairy and non-organic food started 10 years ago, after her breast cancer had recurred four times in the space of a few years. The presence of a huge tumour in the side of her neck, and a prognosis of less than three months, inevitably focused her mind. She spent an evening brainstorming with her husband, also a scientist, who had recently returned from working in China, over the possible reason why one in 10 women get breast cancer in the UK compared to one in 10,000 in China.

"Something rather special happened," she recalls. "Peter and I have worked together so closely over the years that I am not sure which one of us first said, 'The Chinese don't eat dairy produce'." Recalling the slang name for breast cancer in China - "Rich women's disease", because "they're people who eat Hong Kong food, things like ice cream and cheese", provided further confirmation - as did her further foray into the science behind the epidemiology.

Hormones and chemicals in cow's milk, designed to provoke the rapid early growth of infant cattle, she discovered, include insulin growth factor IGF-1, which causes cells to divide and reproduce - exactly the mechanism that occurs when tumours develop. There were small but significant studies proving the role of IGF-1 in the development of cancer - for instance, showing that pre-menopausal women with high levels of IGF-1 have a higher than average risk of breast cancer, as do dairy-eating vegetarians.

By then, however, Plant was already convinced. Having thrown everything dairy into the rubbish bin that evening, she found that the lump started to reduce in size within days and disappeared within weeks. Her experience in personally advising scores of other women, and thousands of others who have read her book and e-mailed her "to thank me for saving their lives" has convinced her of a "clear link between breast cancer and dairy produce".

Her new book, *Understanding, Preventing and Overcoming Prostate Cancer*, published next month by Virgin Books, will recommend the same diet of non-dairy, exclusively organic produce (to avoid toxic pesticides and pollutants) for sufferers from this increasingly common tumour, which, like breast cancer, is hormone-related, and which, incidentally, is almost non-existent in rural China. If her previous book is anything to go by, it is set to have a major impact on public confidence in mainstream dietary advice.

For the problem is that the dairy danger is viewed as extremist and unproven by most oncology specialists. The dearth of good clinical trials to support what is, they say, so far only a theory, means that doctors rarely, if ever, raise the question of nutrition with cancer patients - and skate around the issues if they're asked.

For Dr Clare Shaw, consultant dietician at the Royal Marsden Hospital, the main priority for cancer patients undergoing treatment is the need to maintain adequate nutritional intake during gruelling radio- and chemotherapy. "Once that's over, people do have an opportunity to consider lifestyle changes that might help them to avoid a recurrence of cancer. But the issue for clinicians is that there's no evidence that avoiding dairy produce will bring any benefits. And research that can be generally applied will be difficult to carry out - because a diet involving no dairy and organic vegetables is more likely to attract a self-selected group of people who are middle class and middle-aged."

That may be true - but a way forward must be found, says BHC. Of the 11,000 people who contact its helpline every year, over half want information on nutrition. "So often following a diagnosis of cancer, people want to find an accessible form of self-help with which they can get started immediately," says the director of therapy, Helen Cooke. "We know that 40 per cent of cancers are caused by poor diet, and it seems highly likely that recurrences of existing cancers will also be affected

by diet. People are fed up with being told to eat Mars Bars and extra ice-cream to keep up their weight. They want to find out what is truly nutritious."

BHC is demanding that the Government backs independent research to identify the role of nutrition in preventing cancer recurrence, and that good quality information is available to everyone following a diagnosis. It's a move backed by leading oncologist, Professor Karol Sikora, World Health Organisation adviser on cancer. "Increasingly, people with cancer want to know what they can do for themselves, and they should be given all the support and information they need. If for no other reason, the psychological benefits are proven and I have no doubt that people who feel in control have a better chance of survival."

Bristol nutritionists do advise cutting back on dairy foods in favour of soya, with less meat and more grains and fruit and vegetables. But they don't go all the way with Jane Plant's "slightly extreme" dietary guidelines. "Our view is that people should try to add nutritious food to what they are already eating rather than focusing on giving things up. It's about adding more fruit and vegetables to what you normally eat rather than feeling guilty about enjoying coffee and croissants," says Cooke.

The approach has worked for Amanda Myer who now avoids dairy food, but not fanatically. "If I'm eating out and there's cheese in a dish, I'll eat it quite happily," she says. "I can't imagine that small quantities can have any adverse effect, and anyway, I want to avoid anything that makes life more difficult. I'll even buy non-organic food if there's no alternative. But I shudder to think of the quantity of pesticides that I must have consumed with all the non-organic red wine that I used to drink. I still enjoy wine, but now it's all organic," she says.

### **TYING FALLOPIAN TUBES CAN CUT CANCER RISK**

Women with a high probability of developing ovarian cancer could reduce the risk by having their fallopian tubes tied, Canadian researchers have said.

The surgery, known as tubal ligation, offers an alternative to removing the ovaries for younger women with mutations in the BRCA1 breast cancer gene and can reduce their risk of ovarian cancer by up to 72 percent.

Oophorectomy, most effective risk reduction method, robs young women of their fertility and forces them into early menopause complete with hot flashes and other unpleasant symptoms.

- Times of India, 8/6/2001

Could drinking milk increase breast cancer risk? According to the American Cancer Society, in 2019, there were around 268,600 new cases of breast cancer among women in the United States. Over the years, scientists have uncovered a number of lifestyle-related risk factors for breast cancer; these include alcohol consumption, higher body mass index, and lower levels of physical activity. Back to Cancer. Milk Products and Prostate Cancer. According to the Third Expert Report by the World Cancer Research Fund and the American Institute for Cancer Research, there is no strong evidence that dairy products and diets high in calcium increase the risk of prostate cancer. Prostate cancer is the most common cancer among Canadian men (excluding non-melanoma skin cancers). About 1 in 7 men will develop prostate cancer (it is most often diagnosed after the age of 65).