

An alimentary tract

John Rivers

Eat Your Heart Out: The Fallacy of the 'Healthy Diet'. By James Le Fanu. Macmillan, London: 1987. Pp. 184. £10.95.

James Le Fanu has written a book that is certain to sell, though it is more problematic whether it will succeed. For the task that he has taken on is not just that of producing another popular book on nutrition, but that of arguing against the whole direction of modern public-health nutrition — in short, of spearheading the dietary counter-reformation.

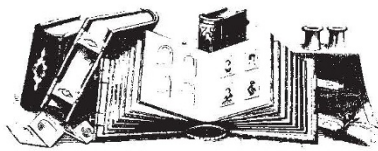
In the book he ranges against the whole modern enthusiasm for stringent eating. It is, he argues, an enthusiasm which in its dietetic Calvinism has a moral appeal that many find attractive. Moreover, in as much as its advocates have gained kudos and advancement from their stand, Le Fanu claims that there are also baser motives behind its popularity. Indeed, he argues, the only thing it has not got is a credible scientific basis.

To convince the reader of his case, Le Fanu uses a two-pronged attack. First he produces an account of the two major nutritional errors of the past — the protein fiasco which misdirected so much aid for 25 years after the Second World War, and the public-health debate of the inter-war period when the 'newer knowledge of nutrition' came to the fore and its advocates persuaded people that they had a massive problem of ill-health from consuming a poor-quality diet. Le Fanu makes the most of the ironical consequence that the public-health nutrition lobby was advocating increased consumption of the very foods it now inveighs against: butter, eggs, milk, meat and white bread.

This argument is well presented, and is all great fun. But in the last analysis it proves nothing. That nutritionists have been wrong in the past is an object lesson they should bear in mind, but it says nothing about the veracity of their current claims. Their case stands simply on the evidence adduced for it.

A critical re-examination of that evidence is the second prong of Le Fanu's attack but it is unfortunately the weaker one. Of course his central contention is right — the evidence used to back up the case for a dietary cause of degenerative disease does have many flaws. But its adequate dissection requires a more detailed analysis than he gives it. In fact, Le Fanu does not reassess the whole body of evidence used to support dietary theories of degenerative disease; rather he merely

points out the inadequacy of part of it. He almost totally ignores the evidence about polyunsaturated fat and that about the possible role of fish oils in preventing heart disease. He treats the whole lipid hypothesis as if it were nothing more than a theory linking high-fat diets to coronary heart disease (CHD). Moreover he pays little attention to the biochemical evidence, which provides plausible causal chains linking diet and disease, and concentrates on the epidemiological and the population intervention studies that have been used to investigate the aetiology and prevention of CHD. But the trouble with these data is that they are often of very poor quality. So reinterpretation cannot provide refutation of a hypothesis, though it does underline the weakness on which that hypothesis was based.



Supplementary reading

*When summer holidays are over
And youths have packed their cricket bats;
When bees can pollinate sweet clover
(Their predators controlled by cats);
When tortoises and finches vie
On evolution's apple-tree,
To flourish and diversify
Ab ovo ad posterity;
When autumn leaves begin abscission
To redden, and at length to fall,
With equinoctial expedition
Responding to Dame Nature's call.
The book reviewers start to flower,
Suffusing soft, expensive scents,
And editors in ivied tower
Compile autumnal supplements,
Selecting, for our delectation
(As far as pocket-books allow),
A groaning smorgasbord collation
Of science, our most sacred cow,
Presenting, in a final section,
Reviews of volumes — mostly new —
That, by some Natural selection,
Are rated worthy of review.
The academic bonfires burn
And old editions seek reprieves.
The avid bookworms rise and turn
The newly issued autumn leaves.
We doff our scanty summer frocks
To don more warm, unselfish jeans,
Ascending from pre-cambrian rocks,
Through fishes, reptiles, monotremes —
Through evolutionary climates.
From protoplast and platypus,
Through curates and canonic primates —
To evolution's summit: Us.
And now, with minds and bodies bent,
We welcome, in our new position,
This supplemental monument,
To scientific erudition.*

Ralph Lewin

Nutritional epidemiology has a weak point at the level of dietary assessment, which Le Fanu misses. Often the food intakes which are cited are merely apparent food consumption figures grossly aggregated for groups, sometimes even nations. Even real dietary intake data can be challenged as they tend to be of dubious accuracy, often coming from studies of small groups for at most a few weeks. Such data make poor predictors of long-term dietary patterns, and it is these which are supposed to be the cause of degenerative disease. So just as these data are suspect when used in support of the conventional wisdom, they are suspect when used to attack it.

The population interventions that have not worked cannot be interpreted either. They show that such interventions have had only limited success, but not whether the failure reflects a failure of the population to stick to the dietary advice, or whether that dietary advice was no good.

Some evidence does present problems that Le Fanu ascribes to it — for example, the fact that after CHD mortality had risen inexorably from the beginning of the century it then began to decline from about the early 1960s in countries as diverse as the United States, Australia and New Zealand, and the fact that this trend has spread eastward since then so that recently even the British statistics have begun to decline (though Eastern Europe has yet to be affected). This temporal change is, as Le Fanu argues, difficult to square with any dietary hypothesis except by special pleading of a purely unprovable kind. But it is not true when he says that it has occurred despite the fact that dietary fat intakes have remained constant; in the United States at least, energy intakes have tended to decrease during that period so that, on the same fat content of the diet, the fat intakes have declined.

Le Fanu does not help his case by taking a cavalier attitude towards the data he re-analyses. For example, without comment he moves from citing mortalities as gross figures to rates for specific age-sex groups; and he routinely fails to attribute the sources of his data, and in some graphs dispenses completely with scales on the axes. Le Fanu is not writing for professionals, but it is hardly appropriate that an author who accuses scientists of bamboozling the public should use data in a potentially misleading way.

Overall this is a book that may fuel the debate about diet and disease, but it will not add substance to the legitimate doubts about current orthodoxy. Nevertheless if it stimulates a critical reassessment of that orthodoxy, it will have served a purpose. □

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