



William Banting (1796-1878)

WILLIAM BANTING: The Father of the Low-Carbohydrate Diet

Whether we like it or not Low Carb Diets are here to stay. It matters not if we blame Atkins, Willett, the Hellers or even Suzanne Summers there is going to be someone who will be touting Low Carb Diets for our patients and there will be controversy. But where it all started.

While searching for some information about Frederick G. Banting, one of the discoverers of insulin, I came upon another Banting. William, who in 1863 wrote the first low carbohydrate diet book, *Letter on Corpulence Addressed to the Public*. Banting had such a big influence in his time that his name was passed into language as the verb “to bant” meaning to diet.

Part 2 The Ridicule Begins To Build

Banting was so pleased with his progress that on top of Harvey's fees, he gave the doctor £50 to be distributed amongst Harvey's favorite hospitals. Although, despite this, he still felt deeply obligated in a way that he could never hope to repay.

But in 1868, Banting published a prospectus and started a fund to found and endow a new institution for the service of humanity – the Middlesex County Convalescent Hospital.

It was to be for those working-class people who could not afford to convalesce but had to return to work to make ends meet thus allowing no time to get over their hospital ordeal and so succumbed to relapses.

There was a small home at Walton on Thames which, although small, was, he thought, possibly sufficient for the purpose. Banting estimated that £12,000 per year was needed to run it.

Banting put up £500, his son £100 and two other members of his family a further £50; with other patrons he raised a total of £5,000.

Banting charged nothing for the first two editions of his book – he didn't want the accused of doing it merely for profit. He had printed 1,000 copies of the first edition and he gave them away.

The second edition numbered 1,500 which he also gave away although they cost him 6d each. Copies of the third edition, still in 1863, were sold at 1/- each.

When Banting's booklet, in which he described the diet and its amazing results was published, it was so contrary to the established doctrine that it set up a howl of protest among members of the medical profession. The 'Banting Diet' became the centre of a bitter controversy and Banting's papers and book were ridiculed and distorted. No one could deny that the diet worked, but as a layman had published it, and medical men were anxious that

their position in society should not be undermined, they felt bound to attack it. Banting's paper was criticized solely on the grounds that it was 'unscientific'.

Later, Dr. Harvey had a problem too. He had an effective treatment for obesity but not a convincing theory to explain it. As he was a medical man, and so easier for the other members of his profession to attack, he came in for a great deal of ridicule until, in the end, his practice began to suffer.

However, the public was impressed. Many desperate, overweight people tried the diet and found that it worked. Like it or not, the medical profession could not ignore it. Its obvious success meant that the Banting Diet had to be explained somehow.

To the rescue from Stuttgart came a Dr. Felix Niemeyer. He managed to make the new diet acceptable with a total shift in its philosophy. At that time, the theory was that carbohydrates and fat burned together in the lungs to produce heat. The two were called 'respiratory foods'. After examining Banting's paper, Niemeyer came up with an answer to the doctors' problem. All doctors knew that protein was not fattening, only the respiratory foods – fats and carbohydrates. He, therefore, interpreted 'meat' to mean only lean meat with the fat trimmed off and this subtle change solved the problem. The Banting Diet became a high protein diet with both carbohydrate and fat restricted. This altered diet became enshrined in history and still forms the basis of slimming diets today.

Banting's descriptions of the diet are quite clear, however. Other than the prohibition against butter and pork, nowhere is there any instruction to remove the fat from meat and there is no restriction on the way food was cooked or on the total quantity of food which may be taken. Only carbohydrate – sugars and starches – are restricted. The reason that butter and pork were denied him was that it was thought at this time that they too contained starch.

Banting, who lived in physical comfort and remained at a normal weight until his death in 1878 at the age of 81, always maintained that Dr. Niemeyer's altered diet was far inferior to the one that had so changed his life.

Not long after Banting's Letter on Corpulence was published the verb 'to bant' entered the language and people losing weight said they were 'banting'. It remained in common parlance well into the Twentieth Century and one still hears it occasionally today.

In Sweden today, 'banting' is still the word most commonly used for dieting to achieve weight loss. So, in Swedish:

'Att banta' = to bant.

'Nej, tack, jag bantar' = No thank you, I am banting.

Next week : The Banting diet is confirmed