

IN FIBRE LIES A MORAL...

Dr Dennis Burkitt MD FRCS FRS, is a man of fibre. Part of it is moral, but most of it is medical. He is probably the world's leading authority on the importance of fibre — or roughage, as it is more commonly known — in the diet.

He is at present in South Africa to help bring his book, "Don't Forget Fibre In Your Diet" to the attention of every South African who, he feels, suffers from the contemporary Western malaise, constipation.

Most intelligent South Africans, are aware of the importance of dietary fibre. It's just that very few of us do anything about it.

We **know** of the importance of bran, the fibrous covering of oat, barley, maize and wheat seeds. We **know** we should eat unrefined flour. We **know** we should eat more bran-based cereals. We **know** we should eat less meat, drink less beer, cut out refined sugar.

But we still do it. And, as result, we become constipated — and use chemical laxatives to cure it — a practice which is not very conducive to good health.

Denis Burkitt — Dr Fibre, as he's become known during his travels through America, Africa, Australia and Europe — is almost messianic in his quest to spread the word of fibre throughout the world.

The lessons he teaches in "Don't Forget Fibre In Your Diet" were learned during a lifetime of research into the subject.

For 20 years he worked as a surgeon in the dark heart of Africa, and observed the correlation between diet and disease. He also identified and described the form of child cancer that now bears his name — Burkitt's lymphoma.

But it was in his studies of diet — and, more specifically high-fibre diet — where he made observations that could well have a far greater long-term effect than even his cancer research.

The bowel, he found, works far more efficiently in the rural areas of Africa and Asia than in the "civilised" West. This he ascribed to the "primitive" diet, which contains three times as much fibre as its Western counterpart.

As a result, Western ailments such as constipation, diverticulitis, hiatus hernia, piles, varicose veins, appendicitis, diabetes, heart disease, bowel cancer, gallstones and obesity were virtually unknown.

Should the effects of Western civilisation be felt, with its dietary em-

phasis on refined flours, sugars and cereals, then these diseases began to manifest themselves.

Dr Burkitt's findings were backed up by previous research, conducted by medical experts for a hundred years or more.

During the 1930's, for example, the high-fibre diet of the Sikh Indians — who were found to be far healthier than other Indians — was fed to animals by Sir Robert McCarrison. Other animals subsisted on the refined foods eaten by people living in Europe.

The animals on the high-fibre diet thrived. The animals on the "western" diet fell sick, and developed illnesses not seen at all in the healthy animals.

During the Second World War, Captain T.L. Cleave, a Royal Navy surgeon, virtually cured the Navy of constipation by introducing fibre into its diet.

It was meeting Captain Cleave that really fired Dr Burkitt with the enthusiasm to spread the word of fibre, something that was a part of our forefather's way of life, but which had been ground out by improved milling methods during Victorian times.

Previously, white bread had been a privilege of the rich, who also developed constipation and all the other nasty "rich man's" diseases. The healthy poor had to be content with socially unacceptable unrefined foods.

However improved milling methods made it possible for the poor to afford white bread, cereals and sugar — and gave them the opportunity to fall sick in a number of new and interesting ways.

Before 1900, for instance, Diverticular disease of the colon was virtually unknown in Britain. This non-cancerous, although extremely painful, condition comes about as a result of the large bowel's straining to expel very stiff motions. The lining of the large bowel stretches, to form "blow-outs", rather like those on a car tyre, causing exquisite agony.

The disease, now the most common bowel ailment in the West, is virtually

unknown amongst rural Africans and Asians. They only develop when a Western, low-fibre, high-protein, diet is imposed on them.

Appendicitis was a "new disease" in the West only a century ago. Again, amongst rural African and Asian communities, it is still virtually unknown.

Significantly the introduction of a Western diet increases the incidence dramatically.

Dr Burkitt feels that constipation, due to a low-fibre diet, is the cause. Obesity, too, is a Western problem that can be tied to a low-fibre diet.

Foods containing fibre, according to Dr Burkitt, have to be chewed. Fibre absorbs saliva and digestive juices, swells up and fills the stomach. The result makes one feel full quicker.

The removal of fibre from carbohydrates like sugar and bran from cereals makes them less bulky, so that one ingests too many calories before one feels full. The result — a world of fatties.

The "straining" that results from constipation can also cause piles, varicose veins and hiatus hernia. Ease the constipation with fibre, and one lessens the chances of these unpleasant ailments occurring.

"Disease is due to the way we live," says Dr Burkitt. "We in the Western world are all grossly over-nourished, eating four times as much protein as we need to.

"We should eat far more carbohydrates, cutting down to a large extent on white flour and sugar. We should eat three times as much wholemeal bread as we do. We should eat far more bran cereal than we do.

"And if we do so, if we eat prudently, we could save ourselves a lot of trouble in the future."

Of "Don't Forget Fibre In Your Diet", Malcolm Muggeridge has said: "Western man is engaged in mounting a dietary holocaust. Dr Burkitt offers us an escape route, showing us how to eat and go on living."

It's surely time we took that escape route.

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