I was flicking through Facebook this evening as I usually do, hoping to vicariously share someone else’s joy in life, when I came across this little tidbit, “You know what? Don’t quit sugar.”

The link was to a blog on mamamia.com.au which asked if the tide of the quit sugar obsession was starting to recede. It discussed the recent post of Sarah Wilson, a journalist for Fairfax and the author of several books on quitting sugar, which have become immensely popular by tagging on the coat-tails of David Gillespie’s “Sweet Poison” books.

In her blog, Wilson confessed to a barely forgivable sin of giving in to peer pressure and eating two chocolate croissants, then emotionally self-flagellating for the rest of the day. That the symptoms that she described fitted nicely into the category of an anxiety neurosis didn’t seem to register with Wilson, who carried on like she had ingested a large goblet of hemlock.

Credit to the mammamia team who published some of the comments of real nutritionists like Cassie Platt, and eating-disorder counsellors like Paula Kotowitz, who said,

“Being harsh on ourselves, not only does not help, but makes us feel so much worse in the long run because it deconstructs our sense of self and causes us to beat up on ourselves. Isn’t it possible that there is a happy medium in there somewhere? It’s not crack. Just food.”

Platt, who is about to release a book titled, “Don’t Quit Sugar”, says,

“Your food choices should be based on biological and metabolic needs. What we eat should fuel our cells, facilitate growth, repair and reproduction and, most importantly, enable your body to function at its very best.”

Platt said that she has previously tried removing sugar from her diet and that she had to “claw” her way back to health.

The mamamia writing team summed up by saying,

“The benefits of reducing sugar intake are widely accepted in the scientific community but the idea of avoiding it altogether remains an issue of serious contention. And the possibility that these sorts of diet programs can mask dangerous eating disorders, is particularly worrying.”

They asked the question, “Has the sugar-quitting backlash begun?” For the love of all things sacred, I seriously hope so.

About a month ago I wrote a piece about the quit sugar fad, and posted evidence that eating an extremely low carbohydrate diet is no better than eating a low fat diet, because it’s calories, not sugar, that makes all the difference to weight gain or loss.
A balanced, low calorie diet has been pushed by nutritionists and doctors ad nauseum for decades, but consistently neglecting to use words like “poison”, “toxin” or “death” has meant that the message is nowhere near as stimulating as the current whim.

Is it possible to have your cake and eat it too? Absolutely. My hero of nutritional science, Dr Rosemary Stanton, spoke at a Brisbane conference a couple of years ago and succinctly debunked Gillespie, Wilson and their ilk. She also explained the concept of feasting, the long forgotten art form of having exceptionally good food once in a while, and enjoy it with friends, rather than eating substandard food every day by yourself, which is the modern trend.

Rather than gorging on sugar every day to compensate for your loneliness and despair, Dr Stanton advocated a diet high in vegetables and little or no processed food on a daily basis. But then once a month or two, she advised to enjoy your favourite food, no matter what it might happen to be – cheesecake, ice cream, chocolate croissants – anything you like. The only rules were to make sure that it is really good quality, the best that you can afford, so that it is worth savouring and looking forward to next time, and enjoy it with friends, since the social aspects of the food we eat are as important as the nutritional value. Sage advice from someone who has been researching nutrition for longer than I’ve been alive.

I’m sure that by now, Sarah Wilson will have got over her sugar intoxication. She may not have enjoyed it, but I hope that ends up being a pivotal moment in correcting the imbalance in our relationship to sugar, and living by the facts, not the latest fad.
Sorry, but sugar is just one of a long line of fads to come and go. The Sweet Poison book was written by a lawyer, David Gillespie. I like lawyers, but understanding law doesn’t give you a degree in biochemistry. I was at a conference where Professor Rosemary Stanton (nutritionist and biochemist) and Mr Gillespie both spoke. Stanton tore him apart.

But it’s not just my opinion. This has been tested scientifically by a group in Adelaide, their work published in 2009[2]. They compared the weight loss effects of two diets over a year, an extremely low carbohydrate diet (like that espoused in the Sweet Poison Quit Plan) and a standard low-fat diet. The extreme low carbs diet contained 4% of the energy intake as carbs compared to 46% as carbs for the low fat diet. Importantly, both diets were equal in the calories consumed.

If the sweet poison hypothesis is correct, and sugar alone is responsible for weight gain/loss then the extreme low carbs diet would show significant weight loss to the low fat diet. If, on the other hand, weight loss is moderated by total calories consumed, no matter what the make up of the diet, then the weight loss for the two diets would be about the same.

The result of the study is bad for Mr Gillespie’s credibility, because both groups lost approximately the same amount of weight (Low Carbs: 14.5 +/- 1.7 kg; Low Fat: 11.5 +/- 1.2 kg; P = 0.14).** The results mirror those of an earlier study by the same authors, using slightly different diets, but again showing that diets of a similar calorie intake result in the same amount of weight loss[3].

The point is, fad diets come and go. The diet that works is one that is calorie controlled. People on zero-sugar diets lose weight because they consume less calories. Any diet that works is because people consume less calories.

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If you feel compelled to cut every ounce of sugar from your diet then fantastic. You will lose lots of weight, and I commend that. But don’t kid yourself. Sugar isn’t a poison. It’s just another fad.

References:


** Some people may wonder why I stated that the results of the study showed a similar weight loss, yet the numbers I quoted showed that the low carb diet had a weight loss of 14.5kg compared to 11.5kg for the low fat group. How can weight loss of 3kg be “the same”? The answer lies in the P value, a statistical measure of the strength of the evidence. A p-value of greater than 0.05 shows that the difference in the groups could have been the result of chance. For more explanation on the P value: http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/what-a-p-value-tells-you-about-statistical-data.html
Mr. Stanton was born in Canton, Ohio, and graduated from Wayne State University's School of Electrical Engineering in 1939. While there, he set up one of the first student radio stations in the country. Mr. Stanton is survived by his wife of 59 years, Mary Wilcox Stanton, of Palm Beach Gardens; three daughters, Sharon Stanton Russell, of Arlington, Mass.; Diana Stanton-Thornbrough, of Boca Raton, Fla., and Pamela Stanton, of Barrington, R.I.; six grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.