

Doctor writes about 'Health Food Junkies'

BY KATHERINE VOGT
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

DENVER (AP) Dr. Steven Bratman has seen the quest for healthy eating take a sour turn from dietary vigilance to dangerous obsession.

Bratman's own extremes in dietary purity peaked in the 1970s when he was living on an organic farm in New York. He disdained to eat any vegetable that had been plucked from the ground more than 15 minutes earlier, and chewed each mouthful at least 60 times. He lectured friends on the evils of processed food and once feared a piece of pasteurized cheese would give him pneumonia.

"To be that obsessed with eating healthy food is to be really out of balance," he said in an interview from his home in Fort Collins.

Bratman coined a new term to define his illness, orthorexia nervosa. He said it was an eating disorder from which sufferers fixate on eating proper food. The term uses "ortho," which means straight, correct and true, and "nervosa" to indicate obsession.

Bratman, 46, an expert on alternative medicine, has written several articles and a book on his theory. While the term is not recognized as a clinical diagnosis — and Bratman hasn't lobbied for such recognition — some officials in the field say he may have identified a dietary trend.

"He's on to something quite interesting," said Adam Drewnowski, director of the nutritional sciences program at the University of Washington School of Public Health. He also is a

member of the task force that established official criteria for eating disorders for the American Psychiatric Association.

"I think there are consequences to being on a virtually fat-free vegetarian diet or a very restrictive diet," Drewnowski said. "But there's a distinction between a trend and a definable eating disorder."

Last year, Bratman detailed orthorexia nervosa in a book called, "Health Food Junkies: Overcoming the Obsession with Healthful Eating," published by Broadway Books.

Like anorexia nervosa and bulimia, the behavior of orthorexia is marked by obsession, he said.

"Eventually orthorexia reaches a point at which the orthorexic devotes most of her life to planning, purchasing, preparing and eating meals," he wrote. "If you had a window into her inner life you'd see little else but self-condemnation for lapses, self-praise for success, strict self control to resist temptation and concealed superiority over anyone who indulges in impure dietary habits."

The transference of all value onto eating makes it a true disorder, he said. The disorder is broken when the sufferer breaks free of obsession.

Tom Billings, 48, a San Francisco computer consultant and co-founder of the alternative diet Web site Beyondveg.com, believes he was orthorexic 30 years ago when he followed a diet of mostly raw fruits and vegetables.

"I had this idea that if I ate

something that wasn't on this approved list I that I would be impure," he said.

Billings said he thought about food all the time and was always hung up on his diet that he couldn't go out to dinner with friends. At the same time he had anorexic tendencies, his 6-foot-1 frame plummeted to 88 pounds.

Eventually he got fed up thinking about food all the time, and returned to a more diverse diet. He now eats raw and cooked foods, and will even eat chocolate occasionally.

Since Health Food Junkies, Bratman has written other books about alternative medicine and has worked as a consultant.

But Bratman doesn't fancy himself an eating disorder specialist. "I would just like somebody to read the book and take a look at themselves," he said.

On the Net:

■ <http://www.orthorexin.com>
■ <http://www.beyondveg.com>

Poor penmanship

Doctors' sloppy handwriting is no joke

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Jokes about the penmanship of doctors are as old as the healing profession itself, but officials at one hospital aren't laughing.

Doctors at Children's Hospital in Omaha who receive complaints about illegible writing or whose sloppy prescriptions lead to medication errors will be required to take a refresher course in handwriting.

Sloppy handwriting can affect patient care, said Dr. Steven Lazaritz, Children's vice president of medical affairs.

"You can complain and make jokes all you want," Lazaritz told the Omaha World-Herald. "The bottom line is you've got to do something about it."

Clear writing is most important in pediatrics because children are more vulnerable to

medications and dosage, said Chris Shaffer, the hospital's pharmacy director. A decimal point in the wrong place on a child's prescription can result in a fatal error, he said.

In 1999, a Texas jury awarded \$450,000 to the wife of a man who died after his doctor's handwritten prescription for Isordil was misread by a pharmacist as Plendil. One drug treats high blood pressure, and the other relieves chest pain.

The man suffered a heart attack and died a few days after the error.

Such mistakes due to illegible prescription orders are more common than most people will admit, Shaffer said. One national study, he added, estimates that 12 percent of prescriptions are transcribed improperly.

The Institute for Safe Medication Practices estimated that 150 million calls are made between pharmacists and physicians each year over unclear prescriptions. The institute called for more research to see if penmanship classes have a lasting effect.

It also called for continued progress toward computerized prescriptions. Children's Hospital is a year or two away from implementing a system that allows doctors to enter prescription orders via computer, officials said.

Children's won't be the only hospital to offer a penmanship program. Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles encourages doctors to use a block-letter style of writing that is fast, but more legible.

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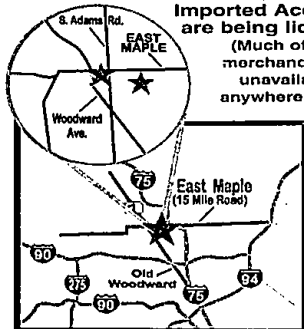
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