

The weight is over - quick fixes and harsh lessons

BY SHARON ASCHAIK

TORONTO (CUP) — Obtaining the ideal weight is not a new aspect of the North American image-conscious culture. Neither is the belief that there's a quick fix solution to shedding excess pounds.

An attractive method to lose weight, popular diet pills like Redux and the phentermine/fenfluramine combination, known popularly as Phen/Fen, have over the past couple of years flooded the North American market. But the recent removal of these popular drugs from the market because of health concerns have forced many patients to reconsider their promises about easy weight loss.

Findings by the American-based MAYO Clinic and other studies indicate that as many as 30 per cent of North American patients using the Phen/Fen combination developed serious heart valve disease — a potentially fatal side effect. Other reported symptoms include heart murmurs, fatigue, and right-sided heart failure. The health problems were linked to the second of the two drugs used in the combination, fenfluramine. Also linked with heart valve problems was the diet pill Redux, which contains fenfluramine or other closely related drugs.

The findings spurred both Health Canada and the US Federal Drug Association to issue alerts regarding the prescription of the drug combo and Redux. Phen/Fen was officially removed from the market by manufacturers last month, as was Redux. (Phentermine, however, is still available on the market on its own or in other drug combinations.)

The drugs withdrawal caused people to once again question the effectiveness of diet drugs, and to ask why there is such an obsession with weight loss in North America.

"We live in a culture which makes a fetish out of slenderness, and makes it a moral imperative, and with slenderness comes a slew of perceived attributes such as happiness, success, sexiness, health, and wealth," said Merryl Bear, director of the National

Eating Disorder Centre. "Therefore there is an enormous pressure on North American women to link self-esteem with a slender body."

Bear attributes the enormous popularity of Phen/Fen, Redux, and other diet drugs to the quick-fix attitude held by people who demand instant solutions to every problem. "In a culture which hopes for that magic solution, a quick-fix, a diet drug is an obvious, very seductive tool," she said.

Evelyn Michaels, editor of Woman's Health Matters, a newsletter funded by the Toronto Hospital, emphasises the importance of being sceptical about taking any type of drug, including diet medication.

"People have to be more sceptical as consumers about everything they take," she said.

But that sill didn't stop the over 600,000 Canadians who received prescriptions for diet drugs between July 1996 and July 1997. Less surprising is the number of patients on diet drugs for longer than the recommended period of time.

Also of concern is the number of patients not diagnosed as "morbidly obese" who insisted that doctors prescribe them diet drugs anyway.

"I begged," confessed a 44-year-old Toronto resident wishing to remain anonymous. "I heard about [Phen/Fen] one-and-a-half years ago in the news. Although the doctor was reluctant, I got the prescription anyway."

The Phen/Fen combination, however, was recommended for patients with a Body Mass Index (BMI) over 30 percent. (This index is used to determine how much over- or underweight a person is for their height.) But some doctors prescribed the drug, albeit for short periods of time, regardless of the patient's BMI. The Toronto resident says she was prescribed Phen/Fen for a month, to help her lose only ten pounds.

When Redux was introduced to the Canadian market in July 1996, it was hailed in the media as a miracle drug, a safe and easy way to lose weight.

But earlier this year, reports

emerged which linked the drug to significant side effects, including pulmonary hypertension, memory loss, mood swings, and personality disorders. And then, just last month, the warnings about the heart valve problems were issued.

But what is unusual is that Redux has been on the market in Europe for over twelve years (and other similar drugs for over thirty), and problems with heart valve abnormalities have

not surfaced in the research of Servier International or Wyeth-Ayerst, the two companies which market the drug in different parts of the world. Both companies have stated however, that they intend to conduct further research into the matter to determine if there is a casual link between the drugs and the reported side effects.

There are concerns from some that Redux and other similar drugs were

brought into the market too quickly in North America.

"Those drugs were adopted too quickly. The company didn't do sufficient research, and the drugs should have been tested more thoroughly," said Josee Garry, a psychologist with the Toronto Eating Disorder Centre.

Michaels agrees.

"I don't think the regulatory bodies really looked at this thoroughly before the drugs reached the market," she said.

Dalhousie's \$165-million stove

BY BRIANNE JOHNSTON

The myth about Dalhousie having a Nuclear reactor is simply that: a myth. Every couple of years the rumours of a "nuclear reactor" hit the campus and raise questions and concerns among students.

Dalhousie's "nuclear reactor" is in fact, a simple research reactor.

After speaking with Dr. Chatt — a chemistry professor at Dalhousie and Director of Slowpoke-2, Dalhousie's research reactor facility — the myth was soon put into perspective.

When I first asked Dr. Chatt if

there was a nuclear reactor at Dalhousie, he laughed and reassured me that there was no nuclear reactor anywhere on campus. He said that this is something that circulates around campus every couple of years.

Dalhousie does not have a nuclear reactor that generates enormous amounts of energy or has the capacity to cause mass destruction. It is merely a research reactor, used for nothing but research. The amount of energy it produces is equivalent to the firing of all four burners on a kitchen stove.

Slowpoke-2 was purchased by Dalhousie in 1976 for \$165-million. Today such a device would cost a

couple of billion dollars. It was bought to help train students doing research in environmental pollution, for example determining the toxic elements in water and air. It can also be used for finding nutritional values in food and analyzing and taking samples from meteorites.

Slowpoke-2 is not just used by Dalhousie students and staff, but is open to anyone. It is the only research reactor facility east of Montreal and, as a result, is used quite frequently.

Slowpoke has little to no danger associated with it. It is operated by a qualified staff and is equipped with standard safety devices.

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by cabinet, to specific individuals that may have profited from inside knowledge of the government decision.

In an attempt to understand the circumstances surrounding the barren controversy, the Chronicle-Herald, through the Freedom of Information Act, discovered that the date of an official government document concerning the Jim Campbell Barren had been altered. The RCMP is now investigating whether someone in the government back-dated an official memo, explaining the pros and cons of de-listing the barren, to make it appear that cabinet considered these points before they made their decision not to protect the site.

Several independent assessments of the ecology and geology of the site were undertaken this summer. Parks Canada concluded that the lichen-dominated communities of the Jim Campbell Barren "...are the only

areas of such habitat on all of the Cape Breton plateau — and possibly in all of Nova Scotia." Field surveys, conducted this summer by researchers from four different universities in the province, discovered an unusually large concentration of rarities, including several species of rare vascular plants, mosses, lichens, and insects, some of which were first known occurrences in Nova Scotia.

The mineral resource assessment, conducted by W.G. Shaw & Associates Ltd., that was instrumental in persuading the government to de-list the barren, has also come under fire.

The author of the Shaw report, William Shaw, has admitted to withholding significant ecological data about the barren because he found it to be "weak and untenable".

In a May 3, 1996 letter, Shaw explains that the true purpose of his so-called independent mineral resource assessment was to de-list the

Jim Campbell Barren as a protected area, and not solely as an independent mineral resource assessment. Shaw wrote, three months prior to the completion of his report, that his analysis will be "...designed to initiate the process that will see the withdrawal of the Jim Campbell's Barren candidate protected area from the protected areas plan."

Local and national salmon fishing groups are concerned that the development of a mine on the barren could destroy a lucrative recreational fishing industry that provides over \$1-million per year to the local economy. Environment Canada hydrologist, Bill Brimley, stated in the Daily News, "The benefit of a possible gold mine must be weighed against the certain damage that would be done to these marvellous natural systems."

Dr. Martin Willison, a conservation biologist at Dalhousie University, has been examining the events surrounding the barren.

"The story of Jim Campbell Barren draws a stark line between respect for biodiversity, indeed life itself, and plain old greed," said Willison. "The barren is a place of rare living riches, while gold is the ultimate symbol of materialism."

"As Earth reaches its capacity to support human greed, this fundamental conflict between the need to preserve the basis of life on this planet and the desire to consume will be repeated many times."

Partially in response to the government's decision not to protect the barren, the World Wildlife Fund has dropped Nova Scotia's grade to a "C-" in their Endangered Spaces Progress Report.

Russell MacLellan, Nova Scotia's current premier, is presently reviewing the Jim Campbell Barren affair, and a decision to reinstate the barren as a protected area or to leave it available for mineral exploration will be made by the end of the month.

Martin Willison hopes the new premier will reinstate the barren. "If we are lucky, Jim Campbell Barren will become an allegory for the future — an example of a right decision at a critical moment of choice."



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