

CONFESSIONS – BIOPHILE 9 - JULY 2008

Gary Player is a vegan – did you know that? Look, I don't have this from his caddie, but my source is reliable and credible enough not to doubt.

He just doesn't seem the type, does he, our Gary? (Whatever 'type' we vegans fall into.) So my immediate question on hearing this news was "Why?"

"Because he read a book called 'The China Report' which convinced him that veganism is the healthiest way to live," so his friend replied. "And Gary is a health *nut*."

Well, I was off after that book like a ball from a two-iron – ever eager, as I am, for more scientific rejoinders to the constant carp that my way of living is nutritionally dangerous. The cover of 'The China Report' bills it as "The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted" and, within a couple of chapters, you realise that its author, T. Colin Campbell, has not made that claim lightly.

Campbell has been in the field of biomedical research for about 40 years, designing and directing large research projects into health and nutrition, many of which have determined governmental policy in the United States. Interestingly, he started his august professional career with a Masters degree in animal nutrition and (very much on the other side of the farm fence) initially devoted his energies to finding ways of making livestock grow bigger, faster. By his own admission, "I was on a trail to promote better health by advocating the consumption of more meat, milk and eggs."

Then he was seconded to the Philippines to investigate why there was such a high prevalence of liver cancer among children (a disease normally associated with adults.) There he discovered a dark secret: that the children who ate the highest animal-protein diets were the ones most likely to get cancer.

Now this information was akin to heresy in Colin Campbell's scientific circles, but to his eternal credit, he decided to start an in-depth laboratory programme that would investigate the role of nutrition, and especially animal protein, in the development of cancer. He must be one hell of a

fundraiser, I reckon, because for the next 27 years, this research was handsomely sponsored by the best-regarded medical institutes in The States (like the NIH, the American Cancer Society and the American Institute for Cancer Research). His findings have also been published in many of the best scientific journals. So we're not talking about the thumb-suck author of some gazillion-seller 'nutrition' book here. Colin Campbell works under the constant scrutiny and review of his donors, his peers and their publications.

In his lab, and most regrettably with the unwitting, unwilling assistance of thousands of mice, Campbell proved that animal protein is so powerful in its effect on cancer growth that the disease could literally be turned on and off simply by changing the level consumed.

Next it was time to widen his scope and test his theory on human subjects. He headed for China, because 87% of that country's population shares the same Han gene stock (thus obviating one important variable) and although the amount of protein the Chinese consume varies, county by county, they eat far, far less animal protein than Americans. Over the course of many years, Campbell surveyed the cancer incidence of 6,500 adults in 130 villages stretching across 65 counties. When he and his team of medical heavyweights were done, they had more than 8,000 statistically significant associations between lifestyle, diet and disease. It was what the New York Times termed "the Grand Prix of epidemiology."

And what the survey revealed was pretty much what they'd found among the lab rodents: lower animal protein intake dramatically decreased cancer initiation and growth. They also found that there was a strong relationship between high cholesterol and many forms of cancer and ... da, da, da ...plant protein did not promote cancer growth, even at high levels of intake.

Campbell's book identifies animal protein as the Big Baddie in many other health problems such as diabetes, obesity, Alzheimers, arthritis and all manner of eye, kidney, bone and brain diseases. We don't have the space to go into those here so let's skip to his chapter: "How To Eat." He's unequivocal: "My recommendation is that you try to avoid all animal-based products." Gimme a High Five, Yo!

Later parts of 'The China Report' detail a sad litany of smear campaigns against Colin Campbell and his fellow researchers – we all know how

powerful the meat, egg and dairy industries are in the United States. But he quietly stuck to his empirical guns, inspired by what the father of medicine, Hippocrates, said 2,400 years ago:

“There are, in effect, two things: to know and to believe one knows. To know is science. To believe one knows is ignorance.”

(The China Study was published in 2006 by BenBella Books, Dallas. I ordered it from Amazon but it might be available in South African bookshops too).