

A Good Time to Remember a Notable Irishman

Cancer, diabetes, heart disease—every day brings new and startling information about the health threats that we face and that are becoming epidemic in our changing world. Perhaps now, as never before, is a good time to remember the legacy of one of the most notable researchers in the field of health and nutrition of the last century, Irish born Dr. Denis Parsons Burkitt.

Dr. Burkitt graduated from Trinity College in 1935, and went on to earn his medical degree at Dublin University. After serving as a surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps during World War II, he served as a surgeon and lecturer in Africa, where, with the assistance of only one other qualified doctor, he was charged with every aspect of health care for 270,000 people in Uganda.



Dr. Denis Burkitt
1911—1993

During his years in Africa Dr. Burkitt developed exceptional observational and analytical skills, which led him to identify and finally develop successful treatment for a cancer that is now called Burkitt's lymphoma. Dr. Burkitt also noted that as African countries began to develop, and portions of the population began to use a more western type diet, they began to develop Western type disease processes that were previously rare or unknown. He also found when he returned to London after 20 years in Africa that the hospitals were filled with diseases rarely seen in Africa: heart disease, gallstones, diabetes and obesity. These diseases, he deduced, could not be related to genetics because when these Africans moved to western countries and adapted the western lifestyle, they became victims of these Western killer diseases. Therefore, he figured these diseases must be related to components in the Western lifestyle.

As Dr. Burkitt compared his data from Africa, he was convinced that the removal of the dietary fibre from foods by the refining processes, and the usage of fibreless 'engineered foods', was at the foundation of many of the West's health issues. When he started doing research on dietary fibre, all he could find under the heading was 'Fibre Optics'—nobody know anything about it! In 1970 he began looking at the relationship between fibre and bowel cancer, and in the process became a leader in the movement to reintroduce dietary fibre into the contemporary Western diet.

Dr. Burkitt has become world renowned for his work, and while scoffed at in the beginning as most notable scientific advances have been over the centuries, the world of health care now recognizes not only the validity of his work, but the seriousness of ignoring his findings. An excerpt from a statement accompanying the honorary fellowship granted him from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada in October of 1992 sums his work up in these words:

Denis Burkitt supported the theory that many of the diseases that are widespread in Western countries but are absent in the Third World, including appendicitis, diverticulitis, diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers, are due largely to the way we eat. On the basis of his convictions he launched a worldwide movement to increase our consumption of vegetable fibres.

It is impossible to grasp the number of lives that have been improved or saved and will continue to be improved as a result of Dr. Burkitt's epidemiological acumen and of his missionary zeal when promoting our health!

Dr. Burkitt once challenged a young man to give his life to preventing disease and bring healing through lifestyle. Since that time, Dr. Hans Diehl has developed the world renowned CHIP (Coronary Health Improvement Project, see www.chiphealth.org) program. Dr. Diehl, now based in California, says; 'Experts say the trend towards a dietary lifestyle with a greater emphasis on low-fat high-fibre foods may have contributed to a 40% drop in coronary heart disease in North America since 1970... The US National Cancer Institute estimates that 40% of cancers may be related to diet and over-nutrition.'

While we may not be able to build all the hospitals we need overnight, and it will take some time to sort out the other issues with our expanding health care system, all of us can start eating more fruits, grains, nuts and vegetables and begin to enjoy the benefits right away. Some of these benefits are: Reduction in the risk of certain cancers, decreased cholesterol levels in the blood, stabilized blood sugar levels, regularity of bowel movements and a major contribution to the normalization of diverticular disease and haemorrhoids.

It's a good time to remember the work of Dr. Denis Parsons Burkitt, another notable Irishman who changed the world for the better. www.emeraldhef-ie.org