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Supporting Veganism and Dietary Change in Primary Care Practice

Dr. Brian McDonough:

It may be very difficult to be a vegan anywhere but I'm sure it's quite difficult if you live in Germany with the number of foods you have to offer and the delicacies that are there that are not necessarily vegan specialties. My guest today is Attila Hildmann who's going to talk with me about vegan and what's it's all about, define it for physicians who don't know what it is, talk about the pros, the cons, and more or less the approach that he suggests in his book *Vegan To Go* which is a book that you can actually get if you'd like to read, if you're interested in sharing with your patients. I know for instance there's a large number of my patients that are considering this as an option. I'm Dr. Brian McDonough and welcome to Primary Care Today on ReachMD. We're glad to have you listening with us, and my first question for Attila is you wrote this book, you obviously know a lot about being a vegan if you are not one yourself and prescribe it, tell me a little bit about the approach, what it is, and for those who aren't so familiar with it, what it's all about as far as lifestyle and also most importantly as a diet.

Attila Hildmann:

Well, to me it all started 14 years ago when I lost my father due to a heart attack. I was 19 years old back then and I was really overweight. I weighed 230 pounds, so I went to the doctor and he told me, "Attila, if you keep on eating what you're eating you will end up like your father." So I had to change something and I looked at certain foods that contain cholesterol, and many of us know that heart disease is connected with your cholesterol levels, and I cut out all these products and I ended up eating a plant-based vegan diet and I have to tell you, the first year was horrible. I didn't know what to eat, then I started cooking and developing recipes over the years, and now it's 14 years later and I published this book called *Vegan For Fit*. *Vegan To Go* is actually just coming out next year. But *Vegan For Fit* got a lot of people inspired, especially in Germany where we're considered to be the country of brats and pork chops, and it's not about changing the whole life. You can make small changes, eat vegan once a week, and just get it started.

Dr. Brian McDonough:

You know, it's interesting you mention that, obviously you are from Germany, I had an opportunity this summer to visit my son who is studying abroad in Berlin, and I spent about a week there, wonderful place to visit, I was just visiting him because he happened to be there which was wonderful, but I did get to sample a lot of the food, and I must admit, not a lot of fruits and vegetables to be had in the meals that I was at least being exposed to and choosing because I was trying to eat around the city with my son guiding me with obviously a college diet may not necessarily be the best either, but how do you do that in a tough environment? Like what are the specifics about being vegan and are you able to do it in an environment where there's lots of other excellent food but maybe not the best for you, deal with it?

Attila Hildmann:

I think one of the most important steps is that you have to learn to cook and you have to learn to make healthy choices when you're on the road, especially I travel back and forth from Los Angeles to Berlin all the time, and you have soul foods in America, and it's like heaven to me, and on the other side if you're in Germany you have to learn to prepare your own dishes because if you go to a restaurant they won't be able to serve you a decent salad. That's the horrible truth, and learn how to cook, try out the *Vegan For Fit* challenge, just 30 days, and learn the basic steps, and maybe grab a falafel when you're on the road. Mediterranean food is always a great choice.

Dr. Brian McDonough:

When we're dealing with our patients and we're talking about different dietary choices and ways to follow things, from your perspective is this the healthiest diet you can have? For instance, you mentioned a Mediterranean diet, would that have been a diet you had gone to? What are the specific things that drew you to this? Because as you say it is difficult. You have to do a lot of food preparation and you

more or less have to think ahead a great deal.

Attila Hildmann:

Oh. Absolutely. And I'm telling you I wouldn't go back. I just can't. I feel so great. I transformed my whole body. I mean I basically lost 80 pounds without feeling hungry, and thousands of people tried the challenge and did it too and became successful. I studied physics and I know a thing or two about antioxidants, electrons, and atoms, and stuff like that, and if you take a look at the list that the US Department of Agriculture published about the foods that contain antioxidants you'll see that there's no item on that list that is animal based. The foods that can actually protect you from aging effects, will make you feel healthy and strong are just plant based food like acai berries, _____ (4:52) green tea, cabbage, vegetables, turmeric, all these super foods are vegan. So to me it just makes sense to eat as many foods of that category and try to avoid red meat, dairy products, because all the doctors will tell you that you should not eat so much of it. So I ask myself the same question, why should I eat something that is considered to be bad and not stick with all the things that most people think are healthy like fruits and vegetables?

Dr. Brian McDonough:

If you're just tuning in you're listening to Primary Care Today on Reach MD. I'm your host, Dr. Brian McDonough, and I am speaking with Attila Hildmann, and he is the author of Vegan To Go. One of the things that struck me about reading your bio and learning more about you besides the fact that you yourself took these recipes and you've lost 77 pounds and you changed your life, is the fact that you don't force things upon people, from what at least I read, you're actually suggesting things but you're not telling people they have to be strict. You seem to give them freedom and flexibility which I know in dealing with my own patients is really important. Sometimes if I do all or nothing I don't always necessarily get the greatest success rates from my patients.

Attila Hildmann:

I have to admit that in the first years I just did it for myself. I didn't care about inspiring other people, it was not primarily because of animal rights reasons, it was just because I wanted to live a healthier life, and so I invented recipes and felt that sometimes you want to eat healthier but you just don't know how to prepare vegetables in a decent way. So you have to learn that at first and I knew that all the time I was the guy who was into eating at fast food joints, I loved to have a hearty burger. I had to find ways to substitute these things and I think when I approach people right now I think one of the most important things for me to remember is that I came a long way and it's always about just inspiring people and show them how to actually accomplish it, and if you preach to people about that you have to go vegan and that you're a bad person because you eat steak once in a while, to me at least that's idiotic. I think take it easy and maybe make healthy food choices, and if you look at America, 600 thousand people die of heart disease every year, and if we make small changes here then this might be the way to a better, healthier future for America.

Dr. Brian McDonough:

You know, one of the things I noticed when I was in Berlin this summer, I was walking a lot. I was staying in an area which I'm sure you know, Potsdamer Platz, and I would be walking across to where my son was, and I would be going pretty long distances, and I what I noticed was a lot of people, I'm not just talking about a few people, a lot of people were taking to the road on their bicycles. In fact you have to really watch where you're going because people will whiz by and if you're not necessarily watching where you're going you can step into a bike lane and get hurt pretty quickly. So a lot of people riding around. Now depending on who's listening to this program in the United States, obviously there's different areas, but most areas I would have to say we're in cars, we're driving around the suburbs, we're not exercising that much. Is the German culture more active or was I just seeing active people? Because I would think that would be beneficial as well.

Attila Hildmann:

You know, I live in Los Angeles and in Berlin and I can definitely tell you that it's not so different. We might drive more with bikes in Germany but we have obesity problems as well, and we're facing the bad reality right now not only in America but also in Germany and it's just about making these healthy choices in your day that you sometimes just take the bike or don't take the car.

Dr. Brian McDonough:

Somebody once told me and I'm sure you've heard it too where they say diet is king, exercise is queen, that diet necessarily has the power when you're trying to keep the weight off. So I'm sure there's a lot of people that might be exercising, but if they're eating a poor diet high in fat it doesn't necessarily help them. When you are writing recipes and you're putting together suggestions for people I notice you also try to make it fun. You're trying to tailor things for young people as well and that's probably pretty important. I know here in the United States one of the big issues we have is a real problem with childhood obesity and trying to deal with that. It would make sense that if you could get people to take a more healthy approach young in life you can avoid a lot of those problems like metabolic syndrome and all the others.

Attila Hildmann:

It's _____ (9:22) about putting out the right image. When I began my work there were also health junkies and vegans out there that took it too far in my opinion and they forced people into their beliefs and they couldn't come out with delicious recipes and they didn't make it fun. They always preached about eat your vegetables, try to avoid animal based foods because you're a bad person, and I think that's the wrong approach. You will inspire people by just living your life and maybe tell them or help them to accomplish their goals, and I think I can really understand most of the young people right now because I lived the life like this, I was an obese youngster and didn't know what to eat and I was always having the bad foods out there like junk food and burgers. So I really understand it and I think that's one of the reasons why people, especially if they're young, get inspired by that.

Dr. Brian McDonough:

And following up your books, just for those who are listening, that it was Vegan For Fun was the 2011 book, Vegan For Fit came out in 2012, Vegan For Youth which you're referring to was 2013, and you're going to be releasing the new book and that will be your fourth book, and that's slated as Vegan To Go. A lot of...

Attila Hildmann:

Oh yeah. Absolutely. And we shot all the pictures here in Los Angeles. It'll be a fun book, but Vegan For Fit was actually a breakthrough especially in Germany. I sold 750 thousand copies of the book and considering that Germany is really like the country of Oktoberfest and pork chops, to me I must say I'm really proud of that.

Dr. Brian McDonough:

You were able to get people, and again I think the key is you're looking at lifestyle issues and changes. From your perspective, and talking as someone who I could say was a patient in a sense because you found a way to lose weight and to avoid the health issues that you say claimed the life of your father, from a patient perspective, we as physicians, it's a physician and health provider audience, what's the best way you think for us to get across the messages of proper diet and trying to encourage our patients to take an active role? What do you think?

Attila Hildmann:

It's about inspiring people and it's about that we make small baby steps and then that we appreciate it. For example, my mom, she used to love meat, now she's like 80 percent vegan, most of the time she eats vegetarian, once in a while she has some fish, and she couldn't imagine that when I started my vegan journey 14 years ago, and now she takes almond butter over heavy cream substitute, now she likes to have the vegan margarine on her bread, and to scramble in the morning just because she likes it and because it's so easy, and I think what most of the people associate with healthy eating is that they think they have to miss out all the time, and if you take a look at the recipes out of Vegan For Fit you will see that you can have your chocolate, you can have your spaghetti bolognese, but we just do it with zucchini noodles and a tofu bolognese, or you can have your sandwich and you burger, but we'll do it in a healthier version, and that makes it so fun and so great, and you'll feel so much better even after doing it for seven days that you'll stick to it, and maybe one of your first challenges, then you do another one, or maybe you go back to eating meat and dairy products, and you'll see a difference, that you will feel not so good anymore, and maybe that's something where you say in the future I'll change my life a little bit.

Dr. Brian McDonough:

Attila Hildmann, I want to thank you for joining us on Primary Care Today, sharing your insights on vegan diet and the books you've written.

Attila Hildmann:

Thanks for having me. I appreciate it.

Dr. Brian McDonough:

I want to also tell those of you that are listening, if you missed any or part of this discussion you can reach us at Reachmd.com/primarycareday and you can download the podcast, you can learn more on the series. Attila, I want to thank you so much for joining us, and to everyone out there, thanks for listening.