

BOOK REVIEW

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'Lifestyle the way to beat MS'

A Perth specialist says be proactive for a relapse-free life. **Alison Batcheler** reports.

A strict low-fat diet, vitamin D and a healthy lifestyle can stop the progression of multiple sclerosis, according to a new book by Perth-based medical specialist George Jelinek who himself has the disease affecting an increasing number of people throughout the world.

Overcoming Multiple Sclerosis brings hope to those with the neurological condition as Professor Jelinek — an emergency medicine specialist at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital and medical academic at the University of WA — challenges the long-held belief that diagnosis with MS signals an inevitable slide into relapse and disability.

"It is just not appropriate with MS to allow yourself to deteriorate over a number of years because there are many things that can be done to stop that," maintains Professor Jelinek who, 11 years on from his own diagnosis remains relapse-free and almost liberated of the spectre of inevitable illness.

The conclusion came as a surprise to someone with his conservative medical training but it was one he reached after 10 years of discerning analysis of the body of medical research, following his diagnosis in 1999, aged 45.

What initially started as some sketchy health principles tacked to his fridge for personal reference, have in the intervening years been credited as medically effective — particularly the benefits of an ultra-low-fat diet and high vitamin D levels.

Daily meditation, exercise and the careful prescription of disease-modifying medication, if necessary, are also part of the approach that Professor Jelinek says should enable most people with MS to live a long, happy and healthy life. Acceptance of the diagnosis and freely expressing emotions about it are also important as was the complete resolve to do whatever is necessary to get well.

The impetus behind compiling his research for publication was the hope it would prevent others suffering as did his mother, who ended her life in 1981, aged 58, after a difficult 13 years of progressive disability caused by the disease.

"There is actually no doubt the majority of this illness, even though there is a genetic predisposition, is



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PROFESSOR GEORGE JELINEK

caused or contributed to by lifestyle factors," Professor Jelinek says. "The ratio is around 70 per cent lifestyle, 30 per cent genetic.

"If you have the susceptibility then the difference between getting it and not getting it is really a matter of lifestyle for most people. And once you actually have it there is very clear evidence that the progression of the illness can be markedly affected by how you live your life.

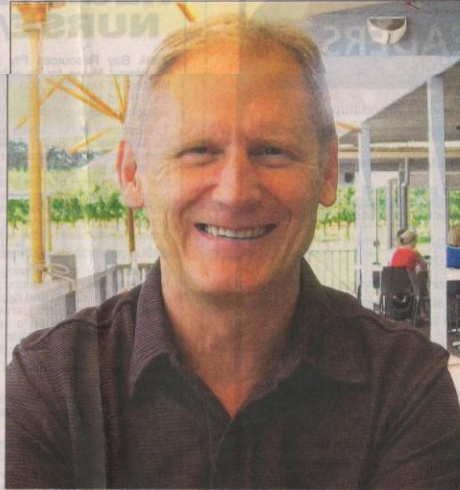
"This is something that has never really been accepted — in the days when my mother had the illness people would say things like, 'This disease has a mind of its own', and accepted that you got disabled because you had the illness and there was nothing you could do about it."

He strongly refutes this disempowering attitude, backed by the weight of medical research to the contrary.

"The evidence from multiple sources is quite clear that lifestyle makes a dramatic difference to disease progression — the evidence is solid and very hard to argue with," he says.

The book presents information and the medical literature in detail but for quick reference, each chapter is prefaced with an easy-to-read summary and concludes with an overview.

Together with Professor Jelinek's personal story, chapters explain the latest medical understanding of MS and examine the role of dietary fat, supplements, sunlight and lifestyle issues including exercise, stress,



Optimistic: George Jelinek says diet changes are vital to fighting MS.

depression and smoking with reference to the latest research on the role of each in the condition.

Disease-modifying drug therapies such as the commonly used interferon and Copaxone are scrutinised and never dismissed, though he concludes the efficacy of pharmaceutical treatments, many of which are highly toxic and with major side effects, fall short of dietary modification and high-dose vitamin D in preventing relapses in most cases.

"The commonly used disease-modifying drugs reduce the relapse rate by 30 per cent, whereas those given high-dose vitamin D in the latest randomised controlled trial had two-thirds fewer relapses in the course of the study," he says.

He cites studies published in The Lancet. These followed MS patients for 34 years and showed a 90 per cent reduction in relapse rate in those who adhered to an ultra-low saturated-fat diet. "A low saturated-fat diet and vitamin D give you the greatest chance of remaining well, in my estimation," Professor Jelinek concludes, but also stresses that pharmaceutical therapies should

be taken if necessary for people with severe disease to stop it getting worse.

"There is no dichotomy between the various therapies, they all need to be looked at together."

In some cases, stabilising the condition on medication can give people the opportunity to start dietary and lifestyle changes, he says. The profoundly anti-inflammatory diet, that is also optimal for reducing the risk of inflammatory arthritis and heart disease, eliminates meat, dairy and eggs — allowing plant-based and wholefoods and seafood.

As well as ensuring their good health, those who have adopted the diet and lifestyle, including about 700 people who attended MS retreats he conducted, do not find it difficult but rather an enjoyable way to live, he says.

In many cases, including his own, it has helped lift the veil of fatigue common in MS, allowing him to keep up the pace of work in a busy emergency department.

"If anyone adopted this way of living they would end up having less high blood pressure, less chance of a

heart attack, less stroke, less stress and they would probably live to a ripe, old age and be pretty healthy so it's a good prescription for living," he says.

While scepticism of the lifestyle approach to management of MS remains among some conservative medical professionals, he says it has been resoundingly endorsed at the highest level with WA state director of neurology, Peter Silbert, also head of neurology at RPH, applauding its empowering effect which allows patients to take responsibility for management of their disease.

Professor Jelinek acknowledges there are no guarantees with a disease that can be more aggressive in some cases but maintains that the majority of people will be able to manage the illness with the lifestyle approach.

"It does sometimes happen that the disease is more aggressive in some people. This is not a guarantee you are going to be well but the data strongly suggests that if you adopt these lifestyle changes you can expect to live a long, happy and healthy life," he says.

Overcoming Multiple Sclerosis: An evidence-based guide to recovery by Professor George Jelinek, published by Allen and Unwin, is available in bookshops for \$45.

Recipe correction

Information supplied last week for a muffin recipe gave an incorrect quantity of flour. The correct and full recipe is as follows:

Ingredients (makes 24)

4 cups self-raising flour
4 eggs
1/2 cup custard powder
250ml canola oil
1/2 cup sugar
1 1/2 tsp vanilla essence
1/2 cup oats
500ml fruit juice or reduced fat milk
1/2 cup chopped or grated fruit
Method: Preheat oven to 180C. Place all dry ingredients in a bowl and add fruit. Mix wet ingredients together and add to dry ingredients. Spoon mixture into lightly greased muffin tins. Cook for 15-20 minutes.

SOURCE: WA SCHOOL CANTEN ASSOCIATION