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Elisabeth Thorsell

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Concerning the treatment of diabetes before insulin

The cover picture this time shows a woman and her huge patch of white cabbage

Diabetes (in Swedish *sockersjuka* or *tvinsot*) is a disease that has been known since Pharaonic times.

It is only fairly recently that good treatments have been found to make life bearable for diabetics.

It is quite unusual to see *sockersjuka* as a cause of death recorded in the death records. *Tvinsot* is much more common, but can also be other diseases, like old age frailty, malnutrition (for small children), consumption, weight loss, etc.

The first known mention of diabetes symptoms was in 1552 B.C., when Hesy-Ra, an Egyptian physician, documented frequent urination as a symptom of a mysterious disease that also caused emaciation. Also around this time, ancient healers noted that ants seemed to be attracted to the urine of people who had this disease.

In 150 A.D., the Greek physician Arateus described what we now call diabetes as “the melting down of flesh and limbs into urine.” From then on, physicians began to gain a better understanding about diabetes.

In the 1700s and 1800s, physicians began to realize that dietary changes could help manage diabetes, and they advised their patients to do things like eat only the fat and meat of animals or consume large amounts of sugar. During the Franco-Prussian War of the early 1870s, the French physician Apollinaire Bouchardat noted that his diabetic patients’ symptoms improved due to war-related food rationing, and he developed individualized diets as diabetes treatments. This led to the fad diets of the early 1900s, the “oat-cure” (daily allowance is approximately eight ounces of oatmeal mixed with eight ounces of butter, eaten every two hours), the milk diet, the rice cure, “potato therapy,” opium, and overfeeding to compensate for the loss of fluids and weight.

Treatment in Sweden in the 1870s

From the *Nordisk Familjebok* (Nordic Family Encyclopedia) it says that the diabetic patient ought to change their place of

living, take cold baths, take massage, and do gymnastics. He should also avoid all foods containing starch and sugar, like bread, flour, potatoes, sweet fruits, and sweet wine. Meals should consist of meat, eggs, skim milk, vegetables, carbonated waters, wine from the Rhine area, coffee and tea without sugar.

It was then found that the patient could rarely keep to this lean menu for a long time, and must be given leave to have some forbidden food in small quantities. It was considered more important to keep up the patient’s strength than to lower the sugar content in the urine.

A diabetes diet in 1906

A Swedish encyclopedia from 1906 *Folkets bok* tells that the following food items were allowed in any quantities: all kinds of meat, fish, crayfish, eggs, caviar, fermented milk, cheese, butter, lard, fresh vegetables, salad, spinach, and cucumbers. Restricted food items were: bread, milk, fruit, rice, carrots, asparagus, cauliflowers, and some weak beer and non-sugary wine. Forbidden were: sweet desserts, cakes, honey, potatoes, hot oatmeal, peas, beans, and sweet wine.

The most difficult thing for the diabetic was to give up bread, but fat, like butter and cream were not only allowed and were supposedly good for thin diabetics.

Advances in treatment

In 1916, Boston scientist Elliott Joslin established himself as one of the world’s leading diabetes experts by creating the textbook *The Treatment of Diabetes Mellitus*, which reported that a fasting diet combined with regular exercise could significantly reduce the risk of death in diabetes patients. Today, doctors and diabetes educators still use these principles when teaching their patients about lifestyle changes for the management of diabetes.

Finally – insulin

Frederick Banting, a physician in Ontario, Canada, first had the idea to use insulin to

treat diabetes in 1920, and he and his colleagues began trying out his theory in animal experiments. Banting and his team finally used insulin to successfully treat a diabetic patient in 1922 and were awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine the following year.



Frederick Banting (1891–1941).

The cover picture

The picture shows Mrs. Maria Engelbrekt, maiden name Hollstedt, and her white cabbage patch. Maria was born 6 May 1870 in Grundsjöhyttan, Nordmark (Värm.). On 2 May 1890 she married to Emil Eriksson Egelbrekt, born 5 Mar. 1869 in Nordmarkshyttan, Nordmark, where he was a miner. Emil and Maria had 13 children. Emil died 29 Mar. 1951, and Maria 12 Dec. 1946.

One of the younger sons was named Carl, born 27 April 1910, who was a diabetic, well before the discovery of insulin, so his future was most uncertain.

However his nephew Rånald Engelbrekt has told that Carl could only eat boiled white cabbage and drink unpasteurized milk, which he must have done for years before insulin became available in the early 1920s. Lean meat and other choice foods were not easy to find for a poor miner.

But Carl survived and did not die until 6 April 1983 in Nordmark. He became the local photographer and left a large legacy of local photos.

Elisabeth Thorsell