

Parental Health Beliefs as a Cause of Nonorganic Failure to Thrive

Parental health beliefs and misconceptions about the constituents of a normal diet for infants are reported as a cause for failure to thrive in seven children (four male, three female), aged 7 to 22 months, who were evaluated for poor weight gain and deteriorating linear growth.

After a medical and nutritional evaluation, it was found that the caloric intake for these children had been restricted by their parents to such a degree that they were receiving much less than the recommended caloric allowance for their age and sex.

The parents instituted diets that were consistent with health beliefs that are currently in vogue and recommended by the medical community for adults who are obese or at risk for cardiovascular disease or both. These parents were concerned that their children would become obese, develop atherosclerosis, become dependent on junk food, or develop eating habits that the parents felt were unhealthy. However, these diets resulted in inadequate

weight gain and a decreased linear growth rate in the infants.

Nutritional counseling was provided, all unnecessary food restrictions were lifted, and the caloric intake was increased to the recommended allowance for age. The weight gain rate increased soon thereafter, and the linear growth rate increased within three months of improved nutritional therapy.

Exaggerated parental concerns over excessive food intake in childhood have resulted in additional cases of failure to thrive during infancy.

Pugliese M, Wyman-Daum M, Moses N, Lifshitz F. *Pediatrics* 1987;80:179.

Editor's comment—*In the past few years, we have heard from many self-appointed experts in child care and nutrition who advocate numerous and often unsubstantiated "health beliefs." This report demonstrates what can happen if this "advice" is followed without appropriate medical supervision. Fear of obesity is quite prevalent in our population, and parents are well aware of the commonly held belief that if obe-*

sity occurs in infancy it may persist throughout life. This may not be true, but it can certainly lead to unnecessary dietary restrictions in infancy nonetheless. Similarly, following a "healthy diet" to prevent atherosclerosis and eliminating so-called "junk food" from the diet are also very prevalent and are endorsed by the medical community. Even though the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association have never endorsed low-fat, low-calorie diets for infants younger than 2 years of age, parents with misguided health beliefs have enforced these dietary recommendations for their infants, who then fail to thrive.

Junk food is an abused term. Indeed, there is no junk food, but there may be junk diets. High-calorie snacks are necessary for children, since they contribute up to one third of a child's usual dietary intake. A cookie or a chocolate sundae may be necessary and appropriate if the remainder of a child's diet is well-balanced. Eliminating these high-calorie snacks could result in an inability to ingest the calories that are necessary for growth in childhood.

Fima Lifshitz, M.D.