

A losing game

Fiona Donnelly finds out why most diets lead to weight gain

IMAGINE a diet where nothing is forbidden, you can eat your favourite foods, drink alcohol and even give the gym a miss.

Brisbane psychiatrist Dr George Blair-West's new book with its catchy title *Weight Loss for Food Lovers*, sounds too good to be true. But if you're one of the more than 80 per cent of people who've tried traditional weight loss plans and failed, he says it might be time to examine the psychology behind why you are overeating.

Brisbane-born Blair-West is a GP and psychiatrist, who works as director of Psychophysiology at the Obesity Rehabilitation Unit, River City Hospital in Auchenflower. He's also a failed dieter. After losing 10 per cent of his body weight during the course of a year, through rigorous exercise and diet, he went overseas on holiday for a month with his children and promptly regained the lot.

"The traditional approach to weight loss can actually contribute to weight gain," he says, pointing to research which shows that over a period of five years most dieters not only regain the weight they originally lost, but also add an extra 15 per cent.

It wasn't until Blair-West fell back on his training to try to explain why he'd "failed" that he says he began to understand why he had regained the weight.

"Going on a calorie-controlled diet and depriving ourselves of foods to which we have a deep emotional attachment tends to trigger us to sabotage our weight loss," he says.

He says that as soon as you forbid something, people start to become obsessed with it and points to a landmark study carried out in the 1940s to back his case.

The Minnesota experiment put a group of conscientious objectors in the US on a low calorie diet designed to lose 25 per cent of their body weight, to check the effects this would have on their behaviour, personality and eating patterns. The study, which is used as a basis for "restraint theory" could never be replicated today because it would be deemed unethical, but at the time it was seen as a legitimate way to research how to rehabilitate returning PoWs.

"The men were all fit, healthy young blokes chosen for their personal stability," Blair-West says. "They become more and more preoccupied with food as they starved, taking down pictures of women and replacing them with food. A couple even decided to become chefs after the experiment ended."

Blair-West says the study teaches us that once you start depriving people of food they become preoccupied with it. He says the main reason for the high failure rate for dieters is because we generally take an unsophisticated approach to dieting and fail to apply what we have learnt about the psychology of motivation. "Self discipline is a marker for deprivation which leads to failure. It's normal not to be able to stick to a low calorie diet. If 80 per cent plus fail in their

Weighty business

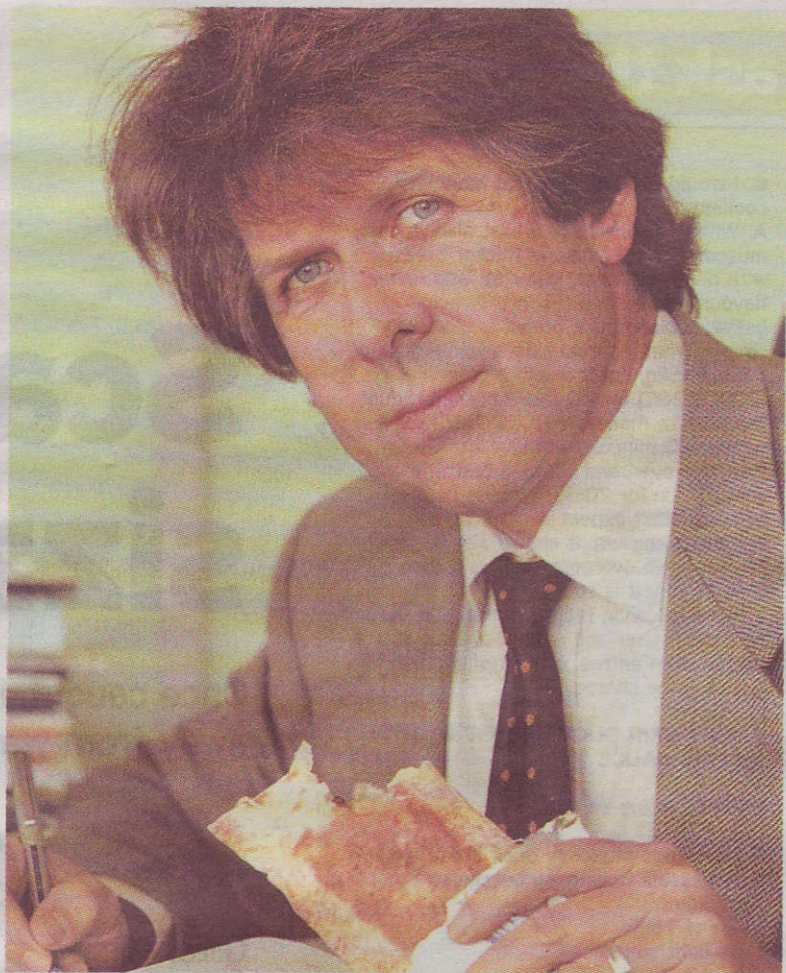
HELPING people shed excess kilos is big business for publishers. In 2005, more than 900,000 diet books were sold. And, according to figures from Nielson BookScan Australia, a group which monitors sales of books sold through bookshops, the sector was worth \$23 million. With hits such as the CSIRO's *Total Wellbeing Diet* and *French Women Don't Get Fat*, by Mireille Guiliano, to boost interest, our appetite for appears boundless for books on weight loss. In contrast, 2004 sales weighed in around the 600,000 mark, although this was still worth a hefty \$13 million.

attempts then it's actually normal not to."

Instead, Blair-West suggests dieters try to identify any fattening foods that for them are their "high sacrifice foods". The next step is to decide which others of the fattening foods they currently eat are "low attachment".

He uses behaviour at fast food outlets to illustrate. He says most people tend to have a particular favourite food that draws them in to places like McDonalds — for example they might





MIND games ... Dr George Blair-West uses psychology to help the overweight.

love milkshakes, or fries — but the way the marketing works they usually end up buying burgers, fries and sugar-laden soft drinks as well, not least because they feel so guilty about being there in the first place and say, 'what the hell'.

"If we can just take out of people's diet the fattening foods which aren't going to trigger a response (he calls these "low sacrifice foods") then they can go in and just have the milkshake, or even better stay home and make a healthier version," Blair-West says.

He believes the key to long-term healthy eating is not to deprive ourselves mercilessly but to savour our favourite foods, and enjoy them in smaller amounts and different ways.

While exercise is important to general well being, Blair-West advises people to increase their incidental activity throughout the day, rather than join gyms which can be problematic for some people, and he says, even trigger overeating. The mere prospect of "going on a diet" is enough to spark off overeating in many repeat dieters, something he calls, "the last supper effect".

And then, there's the "reverse last supper effect" — when people planning to go on a diet, starting Monday use this as justification to overeat during the weekend. Blair-West says

the "mental gymnastics" of overeating are complex.

So, is there anyone who won't be able to use the principles set out in his book? "This doesn't apply to anorexia nervosa sufferers or people who have bulimia. Or to the 10-20 per cent of the population able to restrain themselves without having a rebound, but I believe it is the key to diet cyclists," he says.

Blair-West says most obese people can quote chapter and verse on what they should and shouldn't be eating to lose weight. What confuses them is the "why" behind what is happening to them. Adopting a long-term healthier lifestyle requires effort, but he says this is different to self discipline. "What I'm suggesting isn't new, the problem is no one seems to have researched how to apply this research to the coal face of the (obesity) problem," he says.

"I see myself as a translator of these studies to help people understand how they can help."

Dr Blair-West is hosting a sumptuous four-course lunch, For the Love of Food Luncheon, August 18, 12.15pm at Royal on the Park, cnr Alice and Albert sts, Brisbane; www.royalonthepark.com.au. For more information on *Weight Loss for Food Lovers - Understanding the Psychology & Sabotage of Weight Loss*, see www.weightlossforfoodlovers.com