

Less than six months after publication the book has achieved an unprecedented sale of more than 750 000 hard-cover copies. But, along with the public acclaim, Dr Atkins has found himself increasingly a pariah in establishment circles. Earlier this month, both the American Medical Association and the New York County Medical Society—the former the equivalent of the BMA, the latter a local body that in theory has disciplinary authority over Dr Atkins—went on record with public statements that denounced the diet as unrevolutionary, unbalanced, and possibly unsafe.

The Atkins diet is a high-protein, low-carbohydrate combination that for the first week denies users all access to carbohydrates—fruits, juices and vegetables as well as cake and ice cream—and thereafter allows them to eat only small amounts of favourite vegetables and fruits. At the same time, patients are encouraged to eat as much meat, eggs, butter and similar fatty products as they wish. The purpose of the diet is to put the body in a state known as ketosis: in this state, incompletely metabolised fats leave the body via the breath and urine. The effect, Atkins claims, is to allow the dieter whose self-control leaves a lot to be desired to consume many more calories than he would under a normal reducing diet without the penalty of putting on extra pounds.

Atkins states that he has tried out the diet successfully on more than 10 000 patients in his private practice, but medical authorities dispute both the validity and safety of the regimen. In an unusual intervention, the AMA's Council on Foods and Nutrition issued a statement describing the diet as "grossly unbalanced" and "unlikely to produce a practical basis for long-term weight reduction". One basic concern of the Council was the unlimited consumption of foods rich in saturated fats and cholesterol allowed by the diet. Such consumption, the Council declared, can increase the dieter's risk of suffering circulatory disease or heart attacks. A week after this attack, the other shoe dropped. The New York County Medical Society issued its own rebuttal of the diet with the comment that "the adverse effects of a ketogenic diet include weakness, lack of stamina for prolonged exertion, loss of appetite, hyperlipidemia and hyperuricemia with their potentially harmful effects on the body".

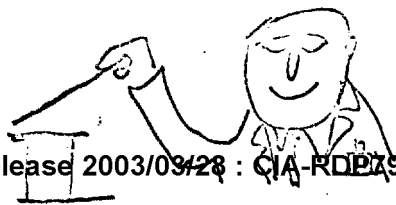
In reply Atkins pointed out that neither body had reviewed the unpublished records of his own clinical investigations of obese patients he had put on the diet, and added that the AMA and the Society had not in fact studied any group of patients that had faithfully followed the diet. He also suggested that in many cases the diet led to falls in the levels of cholesterol in the dieter. Obviously there is little common ground between the two sides and, as in many scientific differences of opinion, the public is left in a general state of confusion. What is all but certain, though, is that obese Americans are sitting ducks for the next diet to come along that offers thinning without thinking.

It has not to attract much attention among the general public, although the subject—parapsychology—is one of great interest in student circles. While the paranormal still carries the aura of charlatanry and stage magic that it has borne for nearly a decade, it is becoming more respectable as a topic of study in scientific laboratories. In early March two physicists from the Stanford Research Institute presented a Columbia University Physics Department colloquium with a report on recent studies involving two psychics.

The colloquium had all the trappings of a grand scientific occasion. The hall was crowded with physics professors, the parapsychology establishment of New York, journalists, and graduates and undergraduates attracted either by genuine interest or cultish curiosity. Murmurings of excitement greeted the appearance of the SRI physicists—Russel Targ and Harold Putoff. Their presentation was certainly spectacular in a scientific sense—a brief description of experiments in which New York artist and psychic Igno Swann influenced the readings of a shielded magnetometer simply by thinking, followed by a film of Israeli psychic (and stage magician) Uri Geller in action. Geller's profession is designed to raise the hackles of critics of parapsychology, who claim that scientists are simply too naive to cope with adept stage performers but, according to Targ, he and his colleague took just about every precaution imaginable—including consulting with a professional magician—to make the experiments cheat-proof. For example, they monitored Geller with a magnetometer before and after every experiment, and conducted many of the studies in double-blind fashion. Nevertheless, Geller recorded 100 per cent success on a variety of studies that included reading figures concealed in double sealed envelopes, detecting hidden objects in aluminium film cans, and causing a laboratory balance to respond as if a force were being applied to it.

The audience was generally friendly, and questions were concerned more with improving the experimental procedures than with attacking the concept of studying psychics in the laboratory. Targ was equally subdued in his conclusion: "We do not claim that either man has psychic powers," he said. "We draw no sweeping conclusions as to the nature of these phenomena or the need to call them psychical. We have observed certain phenomena with the subjects for which we have no scientific explanation. All we can say at this point is that further investigation is clearly warranted." With a cautious approach of this nature, it could be that parapsychology will finally undergo a genuinely disinterested study of its validity.

Peter Gwynne



Goodbye to Brillat-Savarin?

Is France slowly becoming a British colony and will French technology, in some fields at least, play "Indian" to British masters? The whole idea of Great Britain taking France over in certain fields may sound both ludicrous and absurd, but the French are taking it very seriously. An organisation called CACEPA, which keeps a wary eye on French food technology, has drawn up a report for French agricultural co-operatives making it clear that if the present penetration of British capital continues France will, eventually, just supply the raw materials from the fields, and the British will carry out its transformation into supermarketable goods.



Britain is not the only country within the Common Market which has sensed possibilities for expansion in food technology. The Dutch, too, are well in evidence in France. But Britain leads with 63 per cent of commercial takeovers against 26 per cent by the Dutch. Foreigners are now running about 20 per cent of the French food industry.

In 1972 foreigners invested no less than £52 million in the French food industries against £11 million five years ago; this could be because French investors are not prepared to take a chance on their own food technology, which still remains steeped in tradition and is certainly riddled with prejudice. Dominated by the idea that French cuisine and gastronomy hold a preponderant position the average Frenchman finds it difficult to reconcile himself to bottled sauces. For example, tomato sauce is still almost impossible to find in French restaurants. Frenchmen do not take marmalade for breakfast and have not yet become endeared to pork pies. But the supermarkets stock them and sell them as they do dried soups, the popularity of which is ever increasing.

French epicures never go within 300 yards of a supermarket but even in this country of connoisseurs, food habits are changing and packages are replacing the "fonds de veau" which take hours to prepare. Here, perhaps, is the main reason why French food technology is giving way to Britain. Few will admit it and few will believe it, but the evidence is clear.

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The termination of the Vietnam war has France as in every other country, although not particularly