

# A fresh approach

Anne Susskind | May 10, 2007

## **A radical diet may hold the key to treating autistic children.**

After three days on a gluten- and dairy-free, fresh food diet, Karen Wheelwright's severely autistic, four-year-old son Luke "woke up" and made eye contact.

To her amazement, a few days later, her non-autistic two-year-old twins, who she'd put on the same diet to avoid cooking separate meals, also showed marked behavioural improvements - in her daughter's case a lessening of night terrors and fear of dogs, in her son's an easing of his growing pains. Both showed less separation anxiety at child care.

Along with other parents and several doctors, and some of the world's leading experts in biomedicine and nutrition, Wheelwright, a certified mental retardation nurse, will outline her experiences at the Mindd International Forum on Children's Health, an expo-conference in Randwick from May 18 to 21.

It's a controversial proposition they will present, rejected by most in the mainstream medical profession, that by radically changing our dairy and wheat-rich diet to eliminate casein and gluten (found in high concentrations in processed milk and bread), and cutting out processed foods and replacing these with fresh produce and other sources of protein, we can change our children's behaviour patterns.

With the addition of individualised supplements under the guidance of a trained "biomedical practitioner", speakers will argue, we can significantly improve the lot of autistic children, children with ADHD, asthma and allergies.

The conference will also hear that careful diet can help all children, even those with no pressing problems, to help them achieve their physical, emotional and intellectual potential.

Simply put, the rationale is that, to differing degrees, children lack the intestinal bacteria (perhaps due to hereditary factors, perhaps antibiotics, perhaps both) and enzymes needed to digest food, absorb nutrients and eliminate toxins, particularly casein and gluten, which break down in the gut into compounds with "opiate agonist" (or drug-like) properties.

Children with autism are said to have "abnormal leakage" from the gut, allowing these substances to pass into the central nervous system and disrupt brain function - in effect fog up the brain, because they mimic the effects of endorphins.

The "cellular malnutrition" throughout the body that also results from this gut dysfunction in a child is exacerbated if the diet includes processed food with additives, preservatives, emulsifiers and too much sugar.

Conference organiser Leslie Embersits, whose children suffered from a range of disorders including speech delay, motor skill issues and digestive disorders, was able to throw out her prescriptions for Ritalin and cortisone after a dietary overhaul.

"It's necessary to go back to cellular health," she says. "Autism, affecting one in 125 Australian children, is a multisystem breakdown. From a biomedical perspective, ADHD, allergies, asthma, food sensitivities, dyslexia and learning delay are on the same continuum, characterised by high toxicity and low nutrient levels.

"With this goes weakened immunity, poor digestion and metabolism. In developing children, brains and nervous systems are affected.

"It's the brain-gut connection. We all know that when you go to the pub and have a beer it affects behaviour. Why do we think it's OK for children to eat blue icing and sprinkles and not get affected?"

Dr Antony Underwood, a paediatrician in private practice in Gordon, has specialised in the biomedical treatment of autism for eight years. He begins with blood and urine tests to determine the child's biochemistry, then devises a diet program with nutrition supplements for each child. Overall, two-thirds of those with autism have responded markedly, some so much that the label autism is no longer appropriate. About a third do not respond.

For those who do, he says, the cost of the treatment is often offset by the fact that they become more receptive to other therapies, for example Applied Behaviour Analysis and speech therapies. "What parents have told me when I apologise for the costs is that they are spending up to \$30,000 a year on behaviour analysis, and if their child can move through in three months what took one year previously, you save years of treatment, and the cost of the supplements and diet becomes insignificant."

The mainstream medical establishment is sceptical, arguing that there is not sufficient evidence for the claims. A spokeswoman for the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, developmental paediatrician Dr Natalie Silove, says the college has no formal position statement on the link between autism and diet though its British and American equivalents do.

"They say there is no evidence base to any link whatsoever," she says. "There is absolutely no evidence to substantiate dietary interventions in autism. That's the bottom line. It's a lot of pseudo-science . . . [and] anecdotes. A healthy balanced diet is important for everybody, which includes fresh fruit, fibre, vegetables and all that, but a specialised dietary intervention is not indicated in autism."

A spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Ageing says the Federal Government does not take a position on the issue. But a search of the department's website leads to a government-funded 2006 literature review which says that, while no major side effects of eliminating gluten and casein have been noted, there were some concerns "regarding the cost of an unnecessary diet and further restricting dietary intake in individuals who already have rigidity around food intake".

The "leaky gut theory", the review says, remains controversial with no rigorous scientific study.

However, Underwood says the Cochrane Library, "the bible" of evidence-based medicine, has reviewed a study that says a gluten- and casein-free diet significantly reduces autistic traits. "If it has made it into the Cochrane Library, there is some evidence of it being effective," he says.

The official position makes Pymble GP and allergy specialist Dr Marilyn Dyson see red. She has been working with children with ADHD, allergies and learning difficulties for the past 15 years, and also in the area of autism for the past five. She has, she says, more than 136 articles providing the research base for what she does in her practice, a combination of dietary measures and supplements, such as zinc, and usually some vitamin B12, specifically designed after a series of diagnostic tests and X-rays.

"I am concerned [by the information on the website]. Where is the harm? Diet can't harm them. There is a growing number of doctors, more than 50 in Australia, who are practising this approach and seeing continuing improvements in these children and getting some children out of the autism spectrum.

"Fifteen years ago, it was the same with fish oil. They said we shouldn't be wasting time and effort. Now they are saying, yes, the DHA [docosahexaenoic acid, a type of omega-3 fatty acid] in fish oil reduces the chance of Alzheimer's."

Dr Robyn Cosford from Mona Vale has treated hundreds of children with dietary change, specific vitamins, herbs and supplements. Her lowest expectation is behavioural improvement.

"My expectation is to see improvement in intellectual functioning," she says. "Most children come out of the autism spectrum."

Her most dramatic case, she says, involved a six-year-old boy who'd been expelled from 11 schools when he came to her diagnosed with ADHD. Both he and his mother were on powerful medication and there was a court order to have him removed from his mother. Within a month of their visit his behaviour had settled so dramatically that the proposed court order was dropped.

Another mother who extols the virtues of the biomedical approach is Kathryn Ritchie, a business strategy consultant from Bellevue Hill, who last week took both her daughters

back to school after a period of home-schooling because school requirements had been making them so anxious. Her daughters had been diagnosed with a passive form of ADHD and the elder one had had an extremely paranoid and frightening reaction to Ritalin.

So she organised specialist tutors, a gifted learning tutor, a French, music and drama tutor, while instituting a new gluten- and dairy-free organic diet, with supplements such as fish oil, zinc and magnesium, and no colours and preservatives. Now her girls have regained their confidence and are happy at school.

Wheelwright says her children haven't been to a medical doctor in two years.

"Luke has turned four and his language is probably appropriate for a three-year-old, and he's in pre-school two days a week. My other two have the same underlying genetic material and gut. They didn't have the extra bit, [the autism diagnosis] but they don't have bodies that can tolerate gluten and dairy well."