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Vegetarian Diets and Disordered Eating

To the Editor:

Robinson-O'Brien and colleagues have presented important information about the coexistence of eating disorders and vegetarian dietary habits (1). It is important, however, not to suggest that vegetarian diets cause eating disorders, nor is it useful to single out vegetarian children for scrutiny for hidden eating disorders; quite the contrary. It appears that children who have not yet adopted a vegetarian diet require special attention, as they have poorer diets and are at significantly higher risk for obesity.

The vegetarians in this study consumed more fruits, more vegetables, and less fat compared with nonvegetarians. Body weight among younger vegetarians (aged 15 to 18 years) was similar to that of nonvegetarians, but vegetarians aged 19 to 23 years were less likely to be overweight or obese, compared with nonvegetarians: obesity was reported in 14% of never-

vegetarians, 10.7% of former vegetarians, and 5.8% of current vegetarians. Younger vegetarians were also less likely to use alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs, compared with the other groups.

These findings resonate with observational studies showing that vegetarian children have normal longitudinal growth, but are slightly trimmer compared to meat-eaters (2). As adults, vegetarians are much less likely to be obese or to develop diabetes (3-5). When people adopt vegetarian (especially vegan) diets, their overall nutrition improves (6) and risk of chronic disease diminishes (7).

We agree with the study authors that some young people with eating disorders may describe themselves to their parents as vegetarians as "a method of concealing disordered eating behaviors from their parents." This, of course, does not suggest that vegetarian diets lead to eating disorders. Rather, the temporal sequence appears to be in the reverse direction. In a study of individuals with anorexia, fewer than 10% had any history of avoiding meat before the onset of symptoms, although the majority eventually began avoiding red meat (8).

In the present study, the vast majority of vegetarian study participants reported adopting vegetarian diets because of concerns about animals or the environment, or because of a dislike of the taste of meat.

Vegetarian diets do not cause eating disorders and may actually help protect against them. Annual per capita meat consumption rose from approximately 150 lb in the early 1900s to more than 200 lb currently (9). In the same time period, annual per capita cheese intake rose from less than 4 lb to more than 32 lb. These food products have played a major role in the excess energy intake of children and adults, leading to weight problems and a predictable preoccupation with weight loss. Vegetarians, and especially vegans, are protected from these sources of dietary excess, and are less likely to need to diet compared with meat-eaters.

For complete nutrition, vegetarians should include a variety of whole grains, legumes, vegetables, and fruits and take a daily multi-vitamin or other reliable source of vitamin B-12. This is good advice for all children.

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Authors' Response:

We appreciate the comments made by Barnard and Levin and agree with the points that they raise. Our recently published article contributes to the growing body of research investigating benefits and concerns associated with vegetarianism in adolescents and young adults (1). We agree that vegetarianism can be a healthful