

Michael Smith, MD: Treat the Underlying Causes of Weight Gain to Facilitate Successful Weight Loss

Interview by Craig Gustafson

Part 1: Are You Starting With the Right Question?

Michael Smith, MD, is the senior health scientist and online personality for Life Extension, an organization dedicated to extending healthy human life span. He is author of the book The Supplement Pyramid, and he recently released an e-book detailing 9 pillars that underlie healthy weight management. This article is the first in a 4-part series that will be published in various InnoVision Professional Media journals through September 2015, with the whole collection available at <http://www.innovisionhm.com/9pillars/>.

Integrative Medicine: A Clinician's Journal (IMCJ): Thinking back on medical school, what were you exposed to there that influenced your perspective on medicine the most?

Dr Smith: Of the attendees and doctors and professors who taught us, the ones who had the greatest impact on me—believe it or not—were some of the retired internal medicine doctors, general practitioners, that they would bring in. We would form small groups and we would meet up with some of these doctors who had practiced for the past 40 or 50 years, and many of them practiced at a time when they did not have access to a lot of lab work, or radiology, and that kind of stuff. They really had to go by history and symptomatology and a good physical exam. I came away with an appreciation of how holistic, even in conventional medicine, a lot of those older doctors actually were.

That really made an impression on me, especially when I started getting more into internal medicine. I started to appreciate a good physical exam and a good clinical history, the need to look at everything the person is doing, from diet and nutrition to exercise—not just identifying symptoms and a drug, but really looking at the whole picture.

Patients started asking me about how diet and supplements may play a role in addressing what they were going through. Ding, ding, ding. That was when the bell went off and I knew what I was being called to. I felt, at that moment, the desire to develop a type of integrative

practice where I would be more holistic and I would focus more on natural medicine. For me, the biggest influence was those old doctors who would come in and tell you, “Forget about ordering labs. Let’s talk to the patient.” That really made a big impact on me.

IMCJ: Do you feel that the art of healing has been lost in today’s practice of medicine?

Dr Smith: I think a lot of it has been lost. Most doctors—even doctors who practice today with all the technology, especially the experienced ones—will tell you that they get more when they actually have time to listen to the patient’s story than they do, sometimes, out of blood work. An old doctor mentor of mine many years ago said that 90% of all diagnoses can be made simply in the clinical history before you even touch the patient. Isn’t that awesome?

But we are not taught that anymore. Of course, in that story is everything, not just, “Okay, what is your past medical history and what drugs are you taking?” It is the whole story: “What are you doing? How are you sleeping? How is your diet? When do you eat? How much do you eat?” It is all of that. When you really get that full, complete story and you really understand the person better, you are going to be able to help them better. Maybe I didn’t realize the impact that was making on me early. It was later, when patients were asking about nutrition and supplements, that I realized, “Oh, I’ve got to listen to their story better.” That is when that bell went off.

What attracted me to natural medicine and what’s kept me at a place like Life Extension is just stories—understanding what people are going through, their symptoms, their history, their diet, all of that. That story is so powerful.

IMCJ: As you began your practice, how did your approach to obesity and weight-loss issues develop? What were you originally doing and how was that working for you? Was there a point at which that changed significantly?

Dr Smith: The initial way that we would handle a weight problem in a patient was to tell them that they had to cut calories and exercise more. That was about it. There was not much to it, because I did not really know what to talk about. It is a very naive way of looking at weight, but there is a very simple mathematical equation that does determine weight on a day-to-day basis. Calories in—what you are bringing in through food, drink, et cetera—minus the calories you burn out through exercise, metabolism, et cetera. If that number is positive, you gain weight. If it is negative, you lose weight. That was about the only advice I would give—or any medical doctor would give. I think, unfortunately, that is still the advice that they give.

It really was not until I had patients coming in—not just with weight issues, but any age-related disorder, heart problems, blood pressure, whatever it was—asking more questions specifically about how certain foods and how certain supplements might be able to help. “Are there supplements that could curb my appetite and boost metabolism?” When patients started asking me that question, that is when I realized my education was not complete.

IMCJ: Isn't there a point where an individual cannot physically, through time and exertion limits, burn the required calories to lose that much weight through exercise and calorie reduction?

Dr Smith: Sure, exactly. As a physician who did not really understand the role nutrition plays and that there are supplements that can help with counteracting the weight-gaining mechanisms, advising patients to diet and exercise was the easy way out. I know this sounds horrible, but once I have told you, as your doctor, that you need to diet and exercise, then guess who now has the responsibility for doing that? You do. It was a way of washing your hands of it. A year later, when that same person comes back and they have gained 20 more pounds, and a year later they come back and they've gained another 20, obviously something is not right. That recommendation of diet and exercise becomes more of a cliché than any great scientific communication, doesn't it?

IMCJ: Are there processes in the body, dysregulation, that underlie the fat-storing state and need to be addressed in order for the body to work properly and operate as a lean human being?

Dr Smith: The simple answer to that is yes. There are physiological mechanisms that happen inside our bodies, our cells, and our tissues that do drive body-fat accumulation—the weight gain.

Let me back up for a quick second. If you look at that simple mathematical equation, that is a true statement, by the way. It is true to say that your change in weight on a day-to-day basis, week-to-week basis, is equal to calories in minus calories out. That is a way of measuring weight.

It is a simple math equation. It is basic subtraction that you learn, what, in third grade? I don't know when children learn that, but it is pretty simple.

We have found that it is very difficult to manipulate that equation because of where the complexity comes in. What is keeping us from burning more calories? Why aren't we burning more? We have learned that there are some mechanisms that keep people's metabolisms down so they cannot burn more calories. Even when they are exercising, they do not burn as much, or even at rest they do not burn as much. There are things that hold metabolism down. Why are people overeating? What is it? Is it just bad behavior, or are there hormonal effects? Are there neuroendocrine effects? What we find is, that is the case.

IMCJ: How do you talk to a patient about the subtleties of weight management in the context of a typical office appointment and make it clear enough so that it does not leave the patient unmotivated, frustrated, and defeated?

Dr Smith: For me, I did not begin with the idea of “How are we going to lose weight?” I always begin with a different question that I think is more powerful: Why are you gaining the weight in the first place? Listen to what they have to say to that and then ask: What is your lifestyle like? How active are you? What are you eating? When are you eating? How is your sleep? Do you feel sluggish when you get up or do you feel sluggish later in the afternoon? All of these types of questions actually are beginning to tell a story of what might be those underlying mechanisms that are causing that person to gain weight.

For your average health care practitioner, who is dealing with somebody who needs to lose weight, before worrying about the best diet, whether raspberry ketones actually work or not, or if there is any real miracle weight-loss supplement, maybe the right question to ask is: Why are you gaining weight right now?

I think we all agree, even though the weight equation is simple, the reasons and the underlying mechanisms for why people are gaining weight are quite complex. If you really want to help somebody, I think you have to be committed, and the patient has to be committed to further successive office visits where you can really start investigating these different pillars—in particular, 9 pillars that we have recognized at Life Extension—that are linked to weight gain. When you take that angle and you start focusing more on why you are gaining weight, you can plan to look at these pillars with the patient and set up the next 4 or 5 visits to go through some questions that will help us to decide which mechanisms are really driving your weight gain.

Once I know what pillars are driving your weight gain, we can manage those then actually talk about a diet plan and exercise program. Now we actually have a chance for sustained and lasting weight loss. Maybe the very first day is a commitment to discovering the mechanisms of weight gain in that individual person. To me, that is step number 1.