

Health diet

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Reports of the death of my pal Dr Atkins are a big fat whopper

BY KEITH BERKOWITZ

Far from being obese, the diet guru was a model of health until his accident

The first thing I noticed was a crowd of people gathered at the side of the road. Then I saw the bag — a black nylon shopping bag that had a very familiar look. I rushed over and saw there was a body on the ground. I knew at once it was Robert Atkins, the man who created the world-famous diet. He carried a bag like that to work every day. I looked at his eyes. They were open and I could see he looked horrified, as if for a short second he knew what had befallen him. But he couldn't speak.

We had both been walking to work at the Atkins Center. I must have been only about 30 seconds behind him. Even though it was April, it had snowed heavily the night before. I saw the piece of ice he slipped on. Several New Yorkers had given up their coats to wrap around him. That showed how badly he was hurt.

I could see there was a very large bruise on the back of his head. He had fallen straight over backwards — the worst possible way to fall. I had no doubt he had received a serious head injury. He was breathing and I checked his pulse. I tried my best to comfort him and said: "We're getting an ambulance, don't worry, everything will be okay," but he couldn't reply.

In the ambulance he lost consciousness and never regained it. He died nine days later on April 17 last year. I was at his hospital bedside every day.

Now he is gone there have been terrible attacks on him. His life's work has been criticized. It's very hurtful for his widow Veronica. This is a man she loved and whom she is grieving. A man who is dead and can't defend himself.

I was Robert's doctor for the last two months of his life and I know how well he was. He wasn't obese when he died. He was always very active, an avid tennis player. Several friends of mine fell down and hurt themselves on the same day, including a young person I know. Anyone could have fallen down on that ice and died.

Michael Bloomberg, the mayor of New York, said he didn't believe the "bullshit" about Robert falling on the ice and called him "fat", but I don't think he really meant it. He was joking around with some firefighters and thought he was off the record. It made the front page, but a lot was made out of nothing and he apologized to Veronica for his comments.

The Wall Street Journal said Robert weighed 258lb when he died and had congestive heart failure. One of his arteries was blocked. But when he was admitted to hospital he weighed only 195lb — and he was 6ft tall. That's not fat. I'm puzzled that people are still calling him names even after Veronica released this information. It's there in the hospital records.

The reason Robert weighed so much is that his body was terribly swollen. He was getting lots of intravenous fluid to keep his vital organs functioning and to decrease the pressure on his brain. They had to drain a tremendous amount of blood from his brain. It's not uncommon to gain 60lb in those circumstances, even though it sounds a lot. The medical report states that he had "prominent" swelling in both legs. I could see at his bedside how swollen they were.

If Robert could hear what is being said about how his own diet killed him he would be very hurt. I know he would be passionate about defending himself.

Robert was my mentor. I'd been working as a hospital doctor and was growing disillusioned with medicine. We can fix a broken leg but we can't always improve people's daily lives. I didn't see many of my patients getting better. I was able to maintain their health but I couldn't get rid of their chronic medical conditions.

My wife, a nutritionist, came to work for Robert in 1999. She was a little sceptical about taking the job as people in her profession didn't think very highly of Atkins at the time. A low-carbohydrate, high-protein diet went against preconceived notions. Since the 1970s, low fat had been in style, but I said: "Why not?" She was very impressed by how fast people got better and she saw how Robert's patients really loved him. His patients and his wife were the two great loves of his life. He'd do anything for them. He was still seeing 45 patients a week even though he was 72. For him it wasn't about money, but people.

I went on the diet with a hospital colleague of mine as a challenge and we both lost 10lb. I was amazed by how well I felt and how much energy I had. Another doctor friend lost 40lb and ran the New York marathon for the first time. Eventually Robert asked me to come and work alongside him. We used to have breakfast together. He'd always have a two-egg omelette and a couple of sausages; I'd have just the omelette, as I'm Jewish and keep kosher. For lunch, he'd have a salad.

His diet had nothing to do with his death. People forget that genetics plays a huge role in health. He had had a previous heart attack after he caught a virus in Turkey that gave him an irregular heartbeat and caused his heart to enlarge. He told everybody about it, he wasn't hiding anything. For somebody his age, his functional status was very good.

I see many of the same patients Robert did and they're in great health. I keep track of their cholesterol levels and see them get off medication for high blood pressure. He wasn't just a "diet" doctor, he treated people with diabetes, thyroid problems and hormonal disorders. By the time he died he must have treated 65,000 patients and millions more have followed his diet.

We've been taught that all fat is bad but if you go back a few decades, doctors didn't think so. Robert got the idea for his diet from an essay in the American Medical Journal in 1963. It's not suitable for pregnant women or people with kidney disease, but it worked for him and millions of others.

The sad thing is that after 40 years of criticism Robert was beginning to get the recognition he deserved. He was invited to lecture at medical schools, and after his death a lot of research came out showing that cholesterol levels got better on a low-carbohydrate diet.

He died because of a freak accident.

Dr Keith Berkowitz was talking to Sarah Baxter