

## Diet in Old Age

(Written for "The Listener" by  
DR. MURIEL BELLI, Nutritionist  
to the Department of Health)

IT is not the advent of a new year reminding me perhaps of that period when the clock-work begins to run down, but a recent enquiry from a man of 91 about his diet which suggests this subject. To that enquiry I humbly replied that I would rather seek his advice as to how to tell New Zealanders to eat in order to reach his ripe old age.

On a previous occasion, some notes were given in this column under the high-sounding title of "Geriatrics," which signifies the study of the care of the aged. Nevertheless, enquiries continue; and this is not to be wondered at when New Zealand's expectation of life is as high as it is.


If we were to go by rationing allowances, we might be deceived as to the foods emphasised as necessary for old age. You may ask why people over 70 are allowed an extra butter ration. It is mainly because we do not wish to be unkind by denying in old age the foods to which the New Zealander has been accustomed. Old people often like bread and butter; it generally suits their digestion, and gives them little trouble in the preparation, whereas meals of meat and vegetables are not universally tolerated in old age. This concession was actuated by kindness, but it does not mean that a diet of bread and butter or tea and toast is any less deficient for the septuagenarian than it is for other age groups. Indeed, if grandma can take an all-round diet, she will be the better for it. I remember an old relative who still insisted in her nineties on having her pint of milk and her vegetables each day, which I thought displayed great wisdom. Indeed, modern advice to the aged is along those lines. Here are the foods that "gerontologists" advise: a pint of milk; a small serving of meat, poultry or fish; potato; a green vegetable, cauliflower or swede; fruit, preferably tomato or orange or grapefruit or rose-hip powder or syrup; eggs three or four times a week; a little butter; bread and cereals to suit the digestion and permit maintenance of weight, but obesity must be discouraged. If sitting outside in the sunlight is not possible, a daily ration of halibut or other fish-liver-oil.

If chewing is a difficulty, it may be necessary to sieve the vegetables and mince the meat. If the alimentary system is upset by fibrous foods, it may be necessary not only to sieve the vegetables, but also to use only white bread and strained cereals.

The question of using foods that are rich in cholesterol gets attention by some gerontologists, who are of the opinion that hardening of the arteries can be warded off to some extent by refraining from too frequent use of foods rich in this substance, such as eggs, brains, kidney, liver and sweetbreads.

Obesity must be discouraged, we said. This for the reason that it predisposes to such diseases as high blood pressure, heart disease and diabetes. Therefore, cakes, sweets, pastry and steamed puddings are to be taken in strict moderation.

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