MEAL MEDICINE

Diabetes is one of the world's fastest-growing illnesses. In Bengaluru, one doctor has found an innovative way of dealing with it

India is the world's diabetes capital, with about 50.8 million sufferers. According to the World Diabetes Foundation, China follows close behind with 43.2 million cases. Most diabetics have Type 2 diabetes (or adult-onset diabetes) which means the body cannot effectively use insulin. The World Health Organisation estimates that by 2030, 366 million people worldwide will be coping with this chronic disease.

A growing body of research has shown that the modern diet of high-fat, high-protein processed food is the culprit, with poor lifestyles being blamed for the majority of new cases. What's more, with many diabetics experiencing rising sugar levels, worsening complications, weight gain and the need for increasingly higher doses of medication, coping with diabetes can be incredibly difficult. However, thanks to the work of Dr Neal Barnard, Dr T Colin Campbell, Dr John McDougall and Dr Gabriel Cousens among others, it has been scientifically proven that a natural approach based on nutrition rather than medication can not only control, but in some cases even reverse the effects of diabetes.

The diet is a whole food, plant-based diet

Dr Nandita Shah (pictured above), founder of Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature (SHARAN) successfully applies this nutritional approach in India. In 2009, SHARAN (sharan-india.org) launched its Reversing Diabetes workshops by inviting Dr Barnard, author of *Dr Neal Barnard's Program for Reversing Diabetes*, to Mumbai and Bangalore. Since then, 800 participants have taken part in the workshops in India, learning to heal themselves by eating the right foods.

Dr Shah has seen astonishing results in diabetics who have tried her approach. "I had organised a follow-up programme for those who attended my workshops to observe the results," she says. "Most had made dietary changes and achieved very good results in just six weeks. They had normal or considerably lower blood sugar levels and had cut down on medication. Those with high blood pressure noticed that it came down, too. Many also lost weight and felt more energetic."

Such encouraging findings inspired Dr Shah to organise a 21-day retreat. Results came quickly. On only the second day, a young woman with Type 1 diabetes experienced a drop in her blood sugar and reduced her insulin dose by 25%, then 50% on the third day. By day four, a Type 2 diabetic cut his insulin by 80%. On day five, a participant who had been taking four tablets a day was able to stop taking medication. At the end of the retreat, 18 of the 21 participants saw significant improvements in their blood sugar levels. Five were able to abandon medication while others were down to only minute doses. Many also lost weight and saw declines in blood pressure and cholesterol.

"The diet is a whole food, plant-based diet," Dr Shah says. "During the retreat, no animal foods, including meat, milk, butter, yogurt or any other dairy products were served. Also, we used whole foods: white rice was replaced with whole rice, white flour with whole wheat. To retain their nutritional value, vegetables and fruits were not peeled, and there were no processed foods. The diet was also low in fat as no oil was used. This doesn't mean it's a diet of deprivation. On the contrary, the food is always a big hit."

The results seem revolutionary, yet the approach is simple. A low-fat, whole food diet made up of plant foods has been scientifically proven to be the most effective way of controlling or reversing not only diabetes but also other diseases like hypertension, heart disease, osteoporosis and even cancer.

While drugs merely slow the development of diabetes, this diet is effective because it causes a fundamental change in the body. It reduces the accumulation of fat in cells and allows them to use the body's insulin more effectively. Proof, perhaps, that with the right foods, the body can effectively heal itself.