

THE URGE TO PURGE

Cleansing and detoxing isn't scientific.
So why do so many Albertans do it?

By NAOMI K. LEWIS

I

"I'VE FELT KIND OF BACKED UP since I had my daughter last year," an acquaintance told me, drinking herbal tea instead of her usual coffee.

"I cleanse every spring," said another, a few months later, munching on plain brown rice and lettuce.

"I've just been feeling kind of toxic," said another, as he sipped a glass of filtered water with organic lemon juice and maple syrup in lieu of a meal.

They were all on detox diets or fasts. A few online surveys later, I realized I was feeling toxic too. Fatigue? Check. Bloating? I poked my belly. Check. Grumpiness. Yeah, sometimes, for sure. Asthma, migraines, allergies. The verdict: I was a walking bag of toxins.

My spouse and I went to the health food store and bought a detox diet, or "herbal cleanse," with recipe book and several bottles of supplements. Three ascetic days later, we were hungry, grumpy and spending plenty of time in the bathroom thanks to the supplements, a.k.a. laxatives. We gave up, and celebrated our inner filthiness with spaghetti bolognese and large glasses of Scotch.

Then we did some googling. How do detox diets work, anyway? What was the science? We found a swirling vortex of confusion. I started asking friends and found a fairly even division between believers and eye-rollers, and the same

among health professionals. I developed an uncomfortable itch at the back of my mind. I wasn't ready to dismiss the detox story—but somehow it didn't sound quite right.

CALGARY NATUROPATHIC DOCTOR Aparna Taylor acknowledges that detox has often been dismissed by the medical establishment, but speaks of a "paradigm shift" whereby "science is possibly catching up with... the inability of our bodies to efficiently detoxify the chemicals, preservatives and additive load of toxic exposures—anything from the food we eat (e.g., trans fats) to environmental exposure." Depending on whom you ask, these nasties cause a panoply of symptoms, including everything from lethargy, bloating and malaise to arthritis, asthma and migraines. Special diets and fasts give the digestive system a rest so it can focus energy on releasing and excreting the toxins.

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Detoxers, in my experience, are often enamoured of the idea of being wiped clean from the inside. They're driven to describe bowel movements in excruciating detail. Some websites feature photographs of enthusiastic detoxers' gloopy output lifted out of the toilet. It's not just naturopaths, purified friends and online poo photographers pushing the merits of getting cleansed; publications such as *Chatelaine* and *The Globe and Mail* often print gleeful "spring cleaning" articles about the diets.



Tanis Fenton, adjunct assistant professor of community health sciences at the University of Calgary, says it's a misguided trend. "Detoxification is something our liver and intestines do constantly; this normal process is supported by good food, especially vegetables, fruit and fibre from whole grains, and by drinking enough water."

Perhaps the most prolific detox detractor is Dr. Stephen Barrett, a psychiatrist and author who founded quackwatch.com (and who has been dubbed by Deepak Chopra "a self-appointed vigilante for the suppression of curiosity"). Barrett insists detox diets are a scam, plain and simple: that toxins do not build up in the body and cause disease, that the colon is not caked with old feces and that constipation is not toxic, only uncomfortable.

MDs and dieticians say detox is bunk; believers say the medical establishment wants to keep us sick and drug-dependent, but that detoxing can set us free—the kind of conspiratorial claim Barrett cites as one of the first signs of quackery. Definitely an impasse, but so what? Can't both sides be kind of right?

Terry Willard, director of Calgary's Wild Rose College of Natural Healing, says it doesn't really matter what naysayers preach; plenty of people in Alberta and beyond want to detox. "Those are the people we're working with," he says. "Not the people... trying to over-intellectualize." Sounds reasonable: if you don't believe in detox, then don't buy the diets and do mind your own business.

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BUT IF BARRETT IS RIGHT, AND DETOX DIETS DON'T do what the packaging promises, this is a problem. Most obviously, people are buying a false bill of goods, while others are raking in money. Terry Willard says 10,000 of his Wild Rose Herbal D-Tox kits sell every month, at about \$30 a pop, depending on the retailer. Kim Ryrie, a buyer for Calgary's Community Natural Foods, says Willard's cleanse outsells every other brand they carry by far, probably because it's Albertan.

Second, genuinely sick patients may choose these treatments instead of ones that actually work. Third, detox diets can make people sick. Though many critics call detox diets expensive and useless but harmless, Fenton says risks include electrolyte abnormalities, heartburn, liver problems and high blood pressure.

This leaves the final issue, that of pseudoscientific language. In 2009, UK-based Voice of Young Science published a dossier and pamphlet about the detox rhetoric used to sell diets, shampoo, bottled water and other products. According to participant Alice Tuff, then with the charity Sense About Science, the project reacted to "phrases that sounded scientific but have little or no scientific meaning."

THE HARDER I TRIED TO PIN DOWN DETOX RHETORIC, the more proponents' vocabulary slipped through my fingers. When I asked about the terms "toxins" and "detox," no one could provide a consistent definition. I also found that scientific studies and facts have been distorted to support detox-related claims, especially Laval University's oft-cited study showing elevated levels of pesticides and other chemicals in the bloodstream during weight loss. Detox proponents draw on this study to paint vivid pictures of chemicals stuck in our bodies, dislodged only by detoxing. But, Fenton stresses, detox diets do not cause such chemicals to "mobilize" (or become released), and mobilizing them is not a particularly good idea anyway.

Then there's the scientific method. Detox proponents just don't seem to care for it. When I asked Oregon naturopathic physician Dickson Thom why detox diets never undergo scientific tests, he said no one has ever done a double-blind, placebo-controlled study on parachutes, either. Detox diets, like parachutes, "follow natural laws which need no scientific proof... natural laws use common sense to justify their effectiveness."

Yes, our construction of, and understanding of, parachutes is based on established scientific knowledge about the universe's physical makeup and laws—but that knowledge has been established via the scientific method, not common sense. Conversely, detox-related claims are incompatible with established knowledge about the human body. What if I claim bad luck can be alleviated by drinking litres of green juice that washes tiny bad-luck elves from the bloodstream? Wouldn't the first step be to test the bloodstream for these elves? No one would bother, for the same reason that no one bothers to test detoxers' stool or sweat for toxins: because they already know they won't find them.

This doesn't mean the phrases "unlucky" and "feeling toxic" fail to refer to anything. But whatever they do refer to cannot be explained by physical entities lodged in the bodies of their sufferers. Feeling toxic is just not that kind of thing. And neither are the toxins that cause it. "Can science prove that Christ was Christ, Buddha was Buddha? No," Willard told me. "It's not that kind of material."

When asked whether detox fell into the realm of science, Willard said, "For some things, it just doesn't matter what's scientific and what's not scientific."

But it *does* matter. As Sense About Science's Tuff says, "People have a right to know when the claims made by commercial producers and retailers are empty and not actually based on scientific evidence despite being dressed up in 'sciencey' words."

A couple of the countless sciencey-sounding claims about detoxification: "The body moves from constantly working against negativity after it eliminates the toxins that have collected in your body for years" (mastercleanse.org). "The fecal matter on your intestinal lining may be very thick or very thin depending on your lifestyle, genetics, eating habits and a variety of other things..." (drfloras.com).

ALL OF THIS INVITES THE QUESTION: IF DETOX IS not part of a scientific theory, what is it? Writer Helen Foster offers a hint with her book *Detox: 14 Plans to Combat the Effects of Modern Life*, which I picked up in the grocery store. Like many proponents, Foster says toxins include everything from pesticides to fat to alcohol to stress. According to some, even electromagnetic waves emitted by computers and other electronics count, as do negative thoughts.

How can ingested substances, physiological and mental states and microwaves all belong in the same category, with one cure-all? This is why I resist calling detox, with its related ideas, a theory—it's just not coherent enough. Foster's book title implies that "toxins" are not so much physical substances as anxieties and neuroses about uncontrollable aspects of our modern lives.

However, longing to scrub our insides clean is nothing new. Far from it. According to an article on "auto-intoxication and faddism" by Micaela Sullivan-Fowler, a widespread belief in 18th-century France that impacted feces caused just about every disease had people using enemas up to three times daily. Late 19th- and early 20th-century England saw a preoccupation with toxicity that rivals our own. One Charles A. Tyrrell made a fortune selling the "Cascade," an "internal bath" contraption supposed to cure and prevent myriad illnesses. Others treated the pestilent colon with yogourt, spa treatments and all manner of cleaning implements. Dr. William Arbuthnot Lane partially removed colons to rid the buildup inside and thereby prolong life. In most cases, practitioners equated cleaning (or removing) the colon with a return to a more "natural" state—the Cascade was like inner sunshine; Lane's surgery corrected a flaw arising from humans' evolution to the upright position.

Ancient Egyptian physicians were also preoccupied with hurrying fecal matter through the digestive system before it poisoned the rest of the body. According to Sullivan-Fowler, constipation and aggressive treatments for it are mentioned in medical treatises and advice literature from Assyria, Babylonia, Sumer, China, India, Greece and Rome.

Believers say the establishment wants to keep us sick—a claim Barrett cites as a sign of quackery.

This isn't the whole story, though. Detox diets don't claim only to clean the bowel but also the soul, usually without noting any significant difference between the two. Several detox websites announce "Cleanliness is next to godliness." Willard cites religious fasts such as Lent, Yom Kippur and Ramadan as evidence that detox diets address a deep-seated human need to purify, atone and start afresh. When I asked if the Wild Rose cleanse therefore addresses moral rather than physical purity, he said "We don't really know... but even that in itself is a good enough reason to do it."

External cleaning can assuage guilt and anxiety—a phenomenon *Psychology Today* writer Carlin Flora calls "the

Macbeth effect"—and detoxing may simply be an extension of this longing for purity. Flora believes it "entirely likely that envisioning the buildup of 'junk' in our bodies is a way of expressing cumulative emotional damage. Get rid of that and perhaps you can purge personal heartaches, too."

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MY FRIEND M., WHO WORKS IN THE SUPPLEMENT section of a health food store, nails it when she says detox is "a potent metaphor." A metaphor with real effects on people suffering from malaise, general feelings of impurity and anxiety in the face of a decadent culture, polluted environment, alienation from food sources and the ubiquitous chaos of life.

Near the end of my interview with Willard, he said I was unlikely to understand detoxing because my thinking was too linear.

"Unfortunately," he told me, "our society sometimes lives too much in their left brain and has to understand the why for everything. I mean, I can look at a sunset and go 'Oh wow, is that ever a beautiful sunset! Gee, I wonder why it's beautiful...'. Sometimes by explaining it, the whole thing falls apart; the beauty falls apart."

And this is my point. Scientists are interested in why the sunset appears the way it does. Artists and worshippers are interested in its beauty and awesomeness. Detox may have its merits, but it is not scientific and practitioners are misleading and unethical when they claim it is. Feeling toxic is caused by physical substances called toxins or it isn't. Detox diets remove harmful physical substances from the body or they don't. And Barrett is right: they don't.

Detox proponents, I think, have a dilemma on their hands if much of the help they offer depends on dishonesty or at least confusion. So why don't they just drop the pseudoscientific language and call detox a salve for the civilization-battered soul? For good reason: detox may not work anymore if presented as a secular Lent instead of a medical practice. The placebo effect works because the patient believes in the treatment, and many people need to believe in the treatment as medicine, not as metaphor. This is true for me; research and reason have stolen my toxic feeling away.

But despite having talked myself out of it, I doubt the desire to detox is in danger: it seems almost built into the fabric of humanity. Still, I'll remember Fenton's advice, who suggests that when plagued by a toxic feeling of the gut, to eat a lot of fibre, and when plagued by a toxic feeling of the soul, to consider exercise, quiet reflection and maybe prayer. I'll add: try listening to music, reading a good book, watching a sunset.

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