



## **"Death by Veganism" Begins Its Slow Demise**

On June 24, 2007 the Public Editor for the New York Times started a long overdue correction of the public's misconceptions about a vegan diet. This came about largely because of the letters many of you wrote to the Public and Op-Ed editors of the New York Times about the Nina Planck article called "Death by Veganism." Consider these recent events as a good start for a diet revolution that will change everything.

(See the [May 2007 McDougall Newsletter](#) for the beginning of this story.)

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The Danger of the One-Sided Debate

By CLARK HOYT

"We look for opinions that are provocative," said Andrew Rosenthal, the editor of the editorial page. "Opinions that confirm what you already thought aren't that interesting."

But some opinions provoke more than others. Two very different columns by guest contributors, one last week and one last month, caused enormous reader outcries and raised important questions. Are there groups or causes so odious they should be ruled off the page? If The Times publishes a controversial opinion, does it owe readers another point of view immediately? And what is the obligation of editors to make sure that op-ed writers are not playing fast and loose with the facts?... (Deleted is a section on Ahmed Yousef, a spokesman for Hamas.)

Rosenthal and Shipley (the op-ed editor) said that, over time, they try to publish a variety of voices on the most important issues... This wasn't the case, however, with a May 21 op-ed by Nina Planck, an author who writes about food and nutrition. Sensationally headlined "Death by Veganism," Planck's piece hit much closer to home than Yousef's. It said in no uncertain terms that vegans — vegetarians who shun even eggs and dairy products — were endangering the health and even the lives of their children. A former vegan herself, Planck said she had concluded "a vegan pregnancy was irresponsible. You cannot create and nourish a robust baby merely on foods from plants."

Her Exhibit A was a trial in Atlanta in which a vegan couple were convicted of murder, involuntary manslaughter and cruelty in the death of their 6-week-old son, who was fed mainly soy milk and apple juice and weighed only 3.5 pounds. The column set off a torrent of reader e-mail that is still coming in — much of it from vegans who send photos of their healthy children or complain bitterly of being harassed by friends and relatives using Planck's column as proof that their diet is dangerous.

If there was another side, a legitimate argument that veganism isn't harmful, Planck didn't tell you — not her obligation, Rosenthal and Shipley say. But unlike the Middle East, The Times has not presented another view, or anything, on veganism on its op-ed pages for 16 years. There has been scant news coverage in the past five years.

There is another side.

Rachelle Leesen, a clinical nutritionist at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, told me that Planck's article "was extremely inflammatory and full of misinformation." She and her colleague Brenda Warner pointed me to a 2003 paper by the American Dietetic Association, the nation's largest organization for food and nutrition professionals. After reviewing the current science, the A.D.A., together with the Dietitians of Canada, declared, "Well-planned vegan and other types of vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood and adolescence."

Planck said she was aware of the A.D.A.'s position but regarded it as "pandering" to a politically active vegan community.

I won't rehash the scientific dispute in a case in which Planck has her experts and the A.D.A. paper cited more than 250 studies, but I think The Times owes its readers the other side, published on the op-ed page, not just in five letters to the editor that briefly took issue with her.

I even question Planck's Exhibit A, poor little Crown Shakur, who was so shriveled at his death that doctors could see the bones in his body. His death, she wrote, "may be largely due to ignorance. But it should prompt frank discussion about nutrition."

Maybe, if by nutrition you mean a discussion about whether you feed a baby anything at all.

The prosecutor argued — and the jury believed — that Crown's parents intentionally starved him to death. News coverage at the time said that the medical examiner, doctors at the hospital to which Crown's body was taken and an expert nutritionist testified that the baby was not given enough food to survive, regardless of what the food was.

Charles Boring, the Fulton County prosecutor who handled the case, told me it was "absolutely not" about veganism. Planck and Shipley said they were aware of the prosecutor's contention. Shipley said, "We were also aware, though, that the convicted couple continues to insist that they were trying to raise their infant on a vegan diet."

But the jury didn't believe them, and leaving that out put Planck's whole column on a shaky founda-

tion.

Op-ed pages are for debate, but if you get only one side, that's not debate. And that's not healthy.

The public editor serves as the readers' representative. His opinions and conclusions are his own. His column appears at least twice monthly in this section.

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