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The Atkins Way of Giving

Diet guru's widow oversees new research fund worth millions

By Debra E. Blum

Veronica Atkins used to bristle each time the unconventional theories about weight loss and nutrition advanced by her husband, the diet guru Robert C. Atkins, came under attack.

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Now a year after Dr. Atkins's death, his widow's annoyance has turned to resolve. She intends to use her husband's fortune to vindicate him and his low-carbohydrate weight-loss program, which has attracted millions

of followers even as physicians and scientists wrestle over its merits.

"My goal in life and with the foundation now is to carry out his legacy, and to have science prove that he was right all along," says Mrs. Atkins.

As chair of the board of a newly organized grant-making fund, the Dr. Robert C. Atkins Foundation, Mrs. Atkins will award grants to study the safety and efficacy of low-carbohydrate diets. The fund, which received \$40-million from Dr. Atkins's vast estate last year, is expected to receive about \$10-million more by the end of this year.

And upon Mrs. Atkins's death, the fund stands to get hundreds of millions, which could make it one of the 100 wealthiest foundations in the United States. Mrs. Atkins, 66, is the sole beneficiary of a trust, estimated to be worth roughly \$600-million, that will revert to the foundation when she dies. The couple, who were married for 15 years, had no children.

Controversy Surrounds Grants

Run as a supporting organization of the National Philanthropic Trust, in Jenkintown, Pa., the fund has given away \$1.5-million in new grants so far. Among them: \$200,000 for a research project examining the impact of the Atkins diet on obese diabetics.

In the field of nutrition research -- an area very few grant makers focus on exclusively -- the foundation is already becoming a major player.

Still, not everyone may want its money. While the fund's leaders say they are committed to high standards of independent medical research, some observers worry that research paid for by the fund may be perceived as tainted because of its connection to the Atkins couple and the business he established in order to promote low-carbohydrate foods.

Transforming Eating Habits

A cardiologist, Dr. Atkins first came to public notice in 1972 with the publication of his first book, *Dr. Atkins' Diet Revolution*.

In the book, Dr. Atkins laid out a weight-loss plan based on the premise that starchy foods -- like bread, potatoes, and pasta -- are the true cause of weight gain, not the high-protein fatty foods, like red meat, eggs, and cheese, shunned in traditional low-fat diets. And he said that calories didn't count either. People can eat until they are full as long as they stay away from carbohydrates.

Dr. Atkins had tested the diet on himself, and he saw positive results among hundreds of his patients who tried the regimen, too -- weight loss and healthier bodies, he said.

His theories have helped transform American eating habits, and ushered in a wave of low-carbohydrate items on grocery-store shelves and on restaurant menus.

Dr. Atkins's vast fortune was built in large part from the diet-supplement company he founded in 1989, which is known today as Atkins Nutritional. The company is one of the leading producers and distributors of low-carbohydrate food products and supplements. Dr. Atkins also made a good deal of money on royalties from his 13 books, including a 1992 version of his original diet book, which still sits on the *New York Times* best-seller list.

But while his ideas have gained credibility with dieters and some scientists and doctors, they continue to be blasted by many medical practitioners, researchers, and health organizations, which have long advocated a more balanced, low-fat approach to eating. Critics, some of whom dismiss the Atkins diet as a dangerous fad, say it increases the risk of heart disease and other health problems.

Scientists and philanthropy experts agree that creating a legacy for Dr. Atkins that rises above his embattled past will be a critical challenge for his foundation.

To be successful, the Atkins fund will "need to get to a point where investigators are not worried that the Atkins name, getting money from Atkins, would distract people from their findings," says Gary D. Foster, clinical director of the Weight and Eating Disorders Program at

the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine.

'Where's the Data?'

While the Atkins philanthropy plans to focus largely on nutrition research, Dr. Atkins himself did not always give high priority to backing up his methods and claims with hard science.

Eric C. Westman, an internist and smoking-cessation researcher at the Duke University and Durham Veterans Affairs Medical Centers, recalls writing a letter to Dr. Atkins in 1998, asking "Where's the data?" and suggesting that Dr. Atkins give him money to conduct a study.

When Dr. Atkins called him back, Dr. Westman says, Dr. Atkins's response was: "Why should I fund a study if I know what the results will be?" Even so, Dr. Atkins invited Dr. Westman to see his clinic, and in the end he gave Dr. Westman \$50,000 to do a six-month study of 50 people who followed the Atkins diet.

The results were generally favorable. All 41 people who remained on the diet for the length of the study shed pounds, an average of 10 percent of their body weight, and their good cholesterol levels improved, on average. But the study was roundly criticized for its shortcomings, including the lack of a control group of people not on the Atkins diet, and the study group's use of dietary supplements that, among other things, are meant to increase good cholesterol. It would be the first of a growing number of studies in the area that have drawn as much skepticism as they have interest.

In all, Dr. Atkins donated a total of about \$1-million to researchers around the country during his lifetime through a private foundation he had established.

Seeking Independence

Veronica Atkins plans to spend much more through the fund she now oversees. She says she reorganized her husband's original foundation as part of the National Philanthropic Trust, in part, to help stake out the foundation's independence from Atkins Nutritional.

Following Dr. Atkins's death, majority ownership of Atkins Nutritional was sold, but the trust that benefits Mrs. Atkins and, ultimately, the foundation, still owns about 14 percent of the company. Mrs. Atkins says she has resigned her positions with the company to avoid the appearance of any conflicts between her foundation role and the company's for-profit interests.

"I resigned from it just so people wouldn't say, Oh well, what do you expect?" Mrs. Atkins says. "I am a foundation leader now. I have

nothing to do with the company."

But that kind of proclamation is not enough to satisfy critics who say the ties between the foundation and the Atkins name, diet, and money may be too close for comfort.

"Plenty of people are obviously concerned that this is a thinly disguised marketing tool intended not to advance a health issue, but to promote a diet," says Neal D. Barnard, president of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a Washington charity that has been highly critical of the Atkins diet and other low-carbohydrate, high-protein weight-loss plans. "The best way to honor Dr. Atkins's memory is not to enshrine his methods, but to tackle the disease -- obesity -- and test what is the best diet to approach that. And the best diet might have nothing to do with the Atkins diet."

He offers an analogy, using Samuel Morse, inventor of the telegraph: "You don't honor Morse by making sure that everyone believes that the telegraph is the best form of communication."

Eileen Heisman, who is president of the National Philanthropic Trust and sits on the Atkins Foundation board, says that the fund's mission statement is broad enough to encompass many issues related to nutrition, obesity, and the treatment of diseases through diet. The foundation intends to go beyond research, too, she says, supporting education programs and, perhaps, some advocacy work in the field of nutrition.

Most important, she says, the foundation does not have an agenda with regard to promoting Dr. Atkins's philosophy.

"We are asking questions, looking for answers, and interested in creating good research options," Ms. Heisman says. "Yes, Mrs. Atkins is at the table with us, and she does have strong feelings about her husband's legacy, but we all don't have that emotional connection. She is only one trustee and she appreciates that."

Scientific Advisers

Ms. Heisman and Mrs. Atkins serve on the board along with Sharon L. Mueller, a retired accountant who is on the National Philanthropic Trust's governing board. The foundation also plans to appoint a scientific advisory board made up of researchers, scientists, and clinicians who work in nutrition, to help the organization identify areas of interest, draw up grant-application requests, and review applications and research protocols.

The fund has taken other steps as well to try to preserve its independence and that of the researchers it supports, says Abby S. Bloch, the foundation's vice president for programs and research. All

grant contracts, she says, for example, spell out that the scientists have total control over their research data, which means they are free to publish their results. The foundation requires access to the data 30 days before publication -- a typical request among research grant makers.

"As a common courtesy, we just want to know what is coming," says Ms. Bloch, who has a doctorate in clinical nutrition and worked for 30 years at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, in New York. "But even if the results turn out to be completely and utterly disastrous for Atkins, [the researchers] have the total freedom to publish them."

Avoiding Bias

Some scientists who have received Atkins money say uneasiness about the fund is unfortunate. They point out that plenty of investigators regularly get grants for studies from sources who may have a bias but that the independence of their work comes down to their own integrity and the contractual freedom they have to pursue their research. And they argue that scientists face external pressures as well -- such as the need to pass scrutiny by a review panel of peers to be published in scientific journals -- that prevent them from skewing their findings to please a donor.

"If you are going to show a bias in your work to favor your sponsor, it better make you so rich that you can retire," jokes Joseph E. Donnelly, director of the Center for Physical Activity and Weight Management at the University of Kansas. "You'll never get anything looked at for publication ever again."

Despite the controversy associated with Dr. Atkins, Mr. Donnelly's laboratory recently decided to apply for, and received, \$350,000 to test one of Dr. Atkins's most controversial theories: that a person on his diet burns more calories than usual, without more exercise. Mr. Donnelly calls the foundation's decision to award the grant particularly "admirable" given that the results of a quick experiment he conducted along the same lines contradicted Dr. Atkins's theory.

Last year, Mr. Donnelly organized a demonstration for a BBC documentary on low-carbohydrate diets that involved putting a set of identical twins on different diets, one of them low on carbohydrates. Mr. Donnelly's conclusion: Diet had no measurable effect on the rate that a person's body converts calories into energy.

"This was unflattering for Atkins," Mr. Donnelly says. "We told the world this on the BBC. And my expectation when we test this with a true study is that the conclusion will be the same."

Mr. Donnelly is confident that his research, whatever the outcome, will be well received by scientists. But he, like other researchers,

acknowledges that, at least for now, the results of studies paid for by the Atkins Foundation may be met with some skepticism by the general public.

Says Dr. Westman, at Duke, "People aren't used to having diet research funded by diet-book authors." He has been awarded a total of about \$450,000 from the Atkins family since 1998. "We all just have to get beyond the headlines. Science is science."

'Step in the Right Direction'

Despite concerns from some quarters about how objective the Atkins Foundation may be on the subject of diets, most observers welcome a new, big grant maker in the nutrition arena.

"Anything we do in this country to raise awareness about diet, nutrition, obesity, whether it's controversial or not, is a step in the right direction," says Jeannette M. Corbett, chair of the board of Grantmakers in Health.

Ms. Corbett, president of the Quantum Foundation, which focuses on health issues in Palm Beach County, Fla., says that "more research will advance the debate, advance the discussions, and there's never enough money floating around for research on these issues."

She says the initial source of the foundation's money is not in and of itself a problem. "They are driven by their roots -- the money is from someone who promoted low-carb diets -- but that kind of baggage is not necessarily a bad thing as long as they grow from their roots in a responsible way."

The Atkins Foundation could grow more quickly than expected if Mrs. Atkins decides to contribute to it while she is still alive, a possibility she raises along with several other hints about her plans.

Once she sees how things are going at the fund, she says, she may donate more to it to further expand its efforts. She is particularly keen, she says, on fighting diabetes and on educating children about healthy eating habits.

Then again, she muses, maybe she will start her own foundation, and pursue other kinds of charitable work that are unrelated to nutrition.

"Maybe something in music," says Mrs. Atkins, a former professional opera singer. But she quickly swings back to her principal aim. "I really haven't caught my breath yet. I supported my husband before he died, and now more than ever my goal is to make people aware of what they need to know and to support it with research."



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