

## We ate the children last

*Yann Martel*

Sat 17 Jul 2004 01.35 BST

The first human trial was on Patient D, a 56-year-old male, single and childless, who was suffering from colon cancer. He was a skeletal man with white, bloodless skin who could no longer ingest even clear fluids. He was aware that his case was terminal and he waived all rights to legal redress should the procedure go wrong. His recovery was astounding. Two days after the operation, he ate six lunch meals in one sitting. He gained 24 kilos in two weeks. Clearly, his liver, pancreas and gall bladder, the source of greatest worry, had adapted to the transplant. The only side-effect noted at the time concerned his diet. Patient D rapidly came to dislike sweet dishes, then spicy ones, then cooked food altogether. He began to eat bananas and oranges without peeling them. A nurse reported that one morning she found him eating the flowers in his room.

The French medical team felt vindicated. Until then, the success rate of full-organ xenografts was zero; all transplants of animal organs to humans - the hearts, livers and bone marrow of baboons, the kidneys of chimpanzees - had failed. The only real achievement in the field was the grafting of pigs' heart valves to repair human hearts and, to a lesser extent, of pigs' skin on to burn victims. The team decided to examine the species more closely. But the process of rendering pigs' organs immunologically inert proved difficult, and few organs were compatible. The potential of the pig's digestive system, despite its biological flexibility, stirred little interest in the scientific community, especially among the Americans; it was assumed that the porcine organ would be too voluminous and that its high caloric output would induce obesity in a human. The French were certain that their simple solution to the double problem - using the digestive system of a smaller, pot-bellied species of pig - would become the stuff of scientific legend, like Newton's apple. "We have put into this man a source of energy both compact and powerful - a Ferrari engine!" boasted the leader of the medical team.

Patient D was monitored closely. When asked about what he ate, he was evasive. A visit to his apartment three months after the operation revealed that his kitchen was barren; he had sold everything in it, including fridge and stove, and his cupboards were empty. He finally confessed that he went out at night and picked at garbage. Nothing pleased him more, he said, than to gorge himself on putrid sausages, rotten fruit, mouldy brie, baguettes gone green, skins and carcasses, and other soured leftovers and kitchen waste. He spent a good part of the night doing this, he admitted, since he no longer felt the need for much sleep and was embarrassed about his diet. The medical team would have been concerned except that his haemoglobin count was excellent, his blood pressure was ideal, and further tests revealed what was plain to the eye: the man was bursting with good health. He was stronger and fitter than he had been in all his life.

Regulatory approval came swiftly. The procedure replaced chemotherapy as the standard treatment for all cancers of the digestive tract that did not respond to radiotherapy.

Les Bons Samaritains, a lobby group for the poor, thought to apply this wondrous medical solution to a social problem. They suggested that the operation be made available to those receiving social assistance. The poor often had unwholesome diets, at a cost both to their health and to the state, which had to spend so much on medical care. What better, more visionary remedy than a procedure that in reducing food budgets to nothing created paragons of fitness? A cleverly orchestrated campaign of petitions and protests - " Malnutrition: zéro! Déficit: zéro! " read the banners - easily overcame the hesitations of the government.

The procedure caught on among the young and the bohemian, the chic and the radical, among all those who wanted a change in their lives. The opprobrium attached to eating garbage vanished completely. In short order, the restaurant became a retrograde institution, and the eating of prepared food a sign of attachment to deplorable worldly values. A revolution of the gut was sweeping through society. "Liberté! Liberté! " was the cry of the operated. The meaning of wealth was changing. It was all so heady. The telltale mark of the procedure was a scar at the base of the throat; it was a badge we wore with honour.

Little was made at the time of a report by the Société protectrice des animaux on the surprising drop in the number of stray cats and dogs. Garbage became a sought-after commodity. Unscrupulous racketeers began selling it. Dumps became dangerous places. Garbage collectors were assaulted. The less fortunate resorted to eating grass.

Then old people began vanishing without a trace. Mothers who had turned away momentarily were finding their baby carriages empty. The government reacted swiftly. In a matter of three days, the army descended upon every one of the operated, without discrimination between the law-abiding and the criminal. The newspaper Le Cochon Libre tried to put out a protest, but the police raided their offices and only a handful of copies escaped destruction. There were terrible scenes during the round-up: neighbours denouncing neighbours, children being separated from their families, men, women and children being stripped in public to look for telling scars, summary executions of people who tried to escape. Internment camps were set up, nearly always in small, remote towns: Les Milles, Gurs, Le Vernet d'Ariège, Beaune-la-Rolande, Pithiviers, Recebedou.

No provisions were made for food in any of the camps. The story was the same in all of them: first the detainees ate their clothes and went naked. Then the weaker men and women disappeared. Then the rest of the women. Then more of the men. Then we ate those we loved most. The last known prisoner was an exceptional brute by the name of Jean Proti. After 41 days without a morsel of food except his own toes and ears, and after 30 hours of incessant screaming, he died.

I escaped. I still have a good appetite, but there is a moral rot in this country that even I can't digest. Everyone knew what happened, and how and where. To this day everyone knows. But no one talks about it and no one is guilty. I must live with that

## **News is under threat...**

... just when we need it the most. Millions of readers around the world are flocking to the Guardian in search of honest, authoritative, fact-based reporting that can help them understand the biggest challenge we have faced in our lifetime. But at this crucial moment, news organisations are facing a cruel financial double blow: with fewer people able to leave their homes, and fewer news vendors in operation, we're seeing a reduction in newspaper sales across the UK. Advertising revenue continues to fall steeply meanwhile as businesses feel the pinch. We need you to help fill the gap.