

GRAPATI

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Naini Setalvad

Counting on calories

India's celebrity
nutritionists have
plenty on their plate



Sheela Krishnaswamy



Vijaya Venkat

Ishi Khosla



Shikha Sharma



STORY

OVER
COOK

India's celebrity
nutritionists
have plenty
on their plate,
says **Chitra
Narayanan**



Shikha Sharma's celebrity clients like the way she supplements dieting with Ayurveda and yoga



Counting on calories





Ishi Khosla runs a thriving health food store in Delhi and plans to go national

The scene: a conference room in Delhi's Hotel Shangri La. Sheela Krishnaswamy, a nutritionist from Bangalore, is holding forth to a rapt audience about the benefits of soup. The event is a promotion for an instant soup but it's the health message that's going down well with the audience.

Barely a couple of weeks later, the same room is crammed again. This time the show's being held by the International Olive Council which wants to stress the health benefits of Mediterranean diets. Amidst the food specialists, olive experts and doctors who take the stage, there's Mumbai-based nutritionist Naini Setalvad who gets into the specifics of why olive oil — so rich in mono-unsaturated fat — scores over other cooking oils.

As India's obesity and lifestyle disease graph shoots up, a handful of nutritionists are suddenly finding themselves in great demand — not just from individuals looking to slim, but from corporations, food companies, schools, sportspersons and the media as well.

Open any paper in Delhi and Shikha Sharma and Ishi Khosla are familiar bylines, while in Mumbai, Naini Setalvad and Anjali Mukerjee have regular columns. It's the same with TV channels — as food and health shows get more air time, nutritionists are becoming familiar faces, discoursing on diets and healthier ways to lead your lives.

That's a big change from the past when nutritionists were relegated to an insignificant corner of hospitals, preparing diet charts and supervising kitchens. Today, the leading names have metamorphosed into celebrities with formidable client lists.

Take a look at Shikha Sharma's Clinique de Rejuvenation which gets about 200 patients every month and Anjali Mukerjee, who says she has taken on about 20,000 patients during her career. And both are being called in by companies that are becoming increasingly conscious about executive healthcare.

Cut to Bangalore where nutritionists like Sheela Krishnaswamy have created a niche, organising nutritional intervention programmes for large corporations and advising on cafeteria menus.

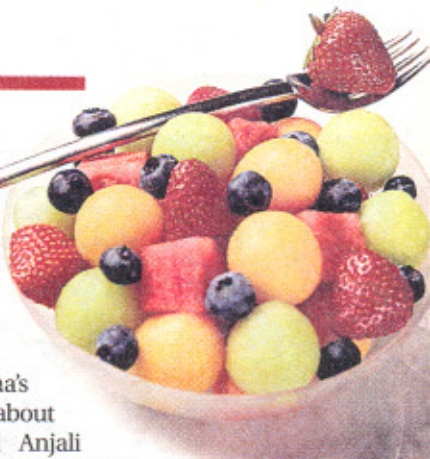
Krishnaswamy's company Niche, which she says pioneered the concept of corporate nutrition, has retainer arrangements with 10 corporations and has been expanding with Wipro to cities like Hyderabad and Chennai.

Also in Bangalore, companies approach Lisa Sarah John, who consults with Prakash Padukone's Badminton Academy, and specialises in offering nutritional tips to sportspersons, including many leading cricketers.

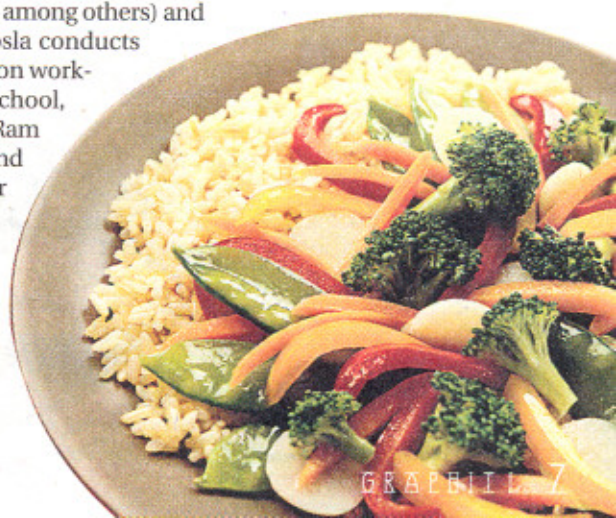
Sharma and Khosla are also called upon to talk on subjects ranging from stress and nutrition or even devising health plans for employees of small concerns. Mukerjee's Health Total has a corporate health program called Bottomline — the Executive Healthcare Plan. Setalvad again is a common name at corporate forums and also advises several food and oil companies. Besides, she also advises hotels and restaurants on menus.

The range of services offered by the top nutritionists is mind-boggling. Apart from individual counselling and corporate workshops, they also consult with gyms (Krishnaswamy has given guidance to Talwalkars, Zone Fitness Studio and Contours Express among others) and schools (Ishi Khosla conducts nutrition education workshops in Doon School, Modern and Shri Ram schools in Delhi and is nutrition advisor to a school contact programme that covers 100 schools).

Then, there are models who need to stay wafer-thin but



Nutritionists are spreading out, advising everyone from schools to beauty contestants and also launching their own health stores and product lines





Naini Setalvad is highly in demand as a speaker on nutrition; (Right) Sheela Krishnaswamy works with large corporations for nutritional intervention programmes



Nutrition is playing a key part in treating ailments like diabetes, hypertension, osteoporosis and food allergies

also need the right nutrition. For a few years, Mukerjee had a virtual monopoly over the Femina Miss India contest, devising health plans for the contestants. Last year, it Sharma's turn to offer tips on how to integrate nutrition with beauty at the contest. She also offered nutritional advice to youngsters who walked the ramp at the Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week.

Many nutritionists have now figured that it's smart to jump into the lucrative health foods market, which is growing at a fast clip. Mukerjee's Health Total was the first to spot the opportunity and the company manufactures a range of nutritious snacks with a high-fibre content. Sold under the brand name Anjali Mukerjee Diet & Health Snacks, they are available in over 2,500 stores around India.

In Delhi, Khosla was the first to start a health food store with her Whole Foods in Friends Colony. She runs a popular health café at Max Healthcare in Saket in Delhi and plans to take her store national.

In Mumbai, Vijaya Venkat has gained

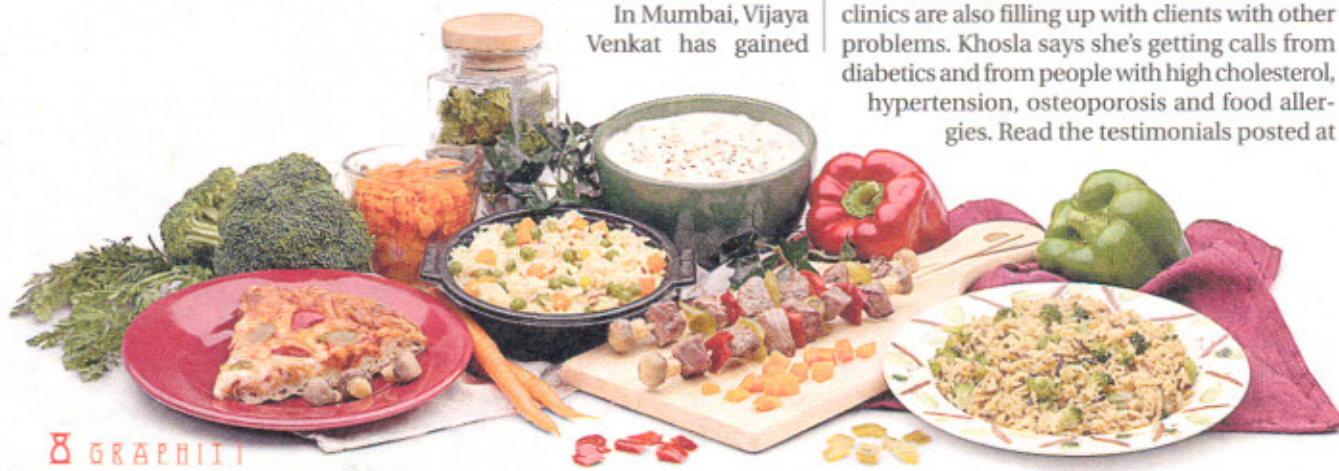
fame for her healthy *dabba* service. But Venkat, who prefers to describe herself as a health activist, insists on an initial consultation and customises diets. Her meals, which costs about Rs 1,250 a month with a Rs 1,000 deposit, have no oil, no milk products, no iodised salt, no sugar, no wheat. Special care is taken to 'make' the food and not 'cook' it in conventional ways that destroy live enzymes and most nutrients.

Sarah John is associated with Calorie Care, again a customised healthy catering service for bachelors and others with a busy lifestyle.

Rising obesity and the obsession with weight loss is the single biggest factor behind the nutritionists' immense growth. Cardiologist Ravi Kasliwal cites a MARG study, which reckons that the way Indians are putting on weight, obesity will rise from nine per cent in 1995 to 24 per cent in 2025.

More than weight loss

Nutritionists admit the bulk of their clients are people who want to lose weight. But clinics are also filling up with clients with other problems. Khosla says she's getting calls from diabetics and from people with high cholesterol, hypertension, osteoporosis and food allergies. Read the testimonials posted at



Differing diets

Their dietary recommendations follow a different path, yet each has found success. Think Shikha Sharma and you connect her with a holistic approach integrating Ayurveda, yoga and a diet plan based on natural foods. In contrast, Ishi Khosla even allows desserts and tries not to disrupt her clients' food habits.

Anjali Mukerjee, probably India's first celebrity nutritionist, came under a cloud some years ago when her clinics were raided by the Maharashtra Food and Drug Administration. But her reputation has withstood the charges and she's expanding fast.

Most established nutritionists start out in hospitals. Khosla worked at AIIMS, Sitaram Bharatiya Hospital and Escorts and Krishnaswamy did the rounds at Breach Candy and Bangalore's Hosmat hospital for 13 years. Mukerjee, too, was with various hospitals for 13 years before going solo.

Both Naini Setalvad and Lisa Sarah John themselves battled weight loss. Naini used to weigh 160kg and tried everything from slimming capsules to gym regimes. "I was so obese I could not walk for more than five minutes," she says. Finally, she decided to study nutrition. And today, she is a svelte 60kg.

Vijaya Venkat enrolled in a nutrition course, many years after marriage "to look after the health of my children better," she says. But she changed course. And the result of her radical philosophy is The Health Awareness Centre. She says her whole approach is to care for people and not cure. Venkat's extreme diets mean she doesn't have as many patients as the others. But she is expanding into Delhi soon.

The one exception here is Shikha Sharma who studied medicine. But she soon became interested in nutrition and has never looked back.

Mukerjee's Health Total and there are huge numbers of diabetic and hypertensive patients in search of food-based cures.

Almost all the nutritionists will give you examples where they have used food to effect cures where drugs have failed. Venkat describes how a patient came to her after more than 150 dialysis sessions. She worked out a natural food based meal plan which, she says, has given the man a new lease of life. "It's not even a year and he looks 20 years younger," she says.

Nutrition in disease management is being endorsed by the medical profession. In the West, research in nutrigenomics is leading to the trend of more doctors working in tandem with nutri-



Vijaya Venkat, who likes to describe herself as a health activist, prescribes tough and radical diets for her clients

tionists — in everything from cancer care to cardiological complaints.

Praveen Chandra, interventional cardiologist, Max Healthcare, Saket, says dietary therapy is very important in heart-related problems and not just as a preventive measure, but also as a supplementary therapy.

Sharath Gopalan, consultant, paediatric gastroenterology, Pushpawati Singhan Hospital, Delhi, points to the new trend of interventional nutrition in a hospital setting, where a nutrition support team works in tandem with doctors.

Gopalan remarks how in earlier decades, research in nutrition was in areas like malnutrition and deficiencies. Today, it is not restricted to the undernourished — both Khosla and Sharma talk excitedly about nutrigenomics.

Nutrigenomics is a new science that focuses on the effect of nutrients on our genes. As scientists study how genes interact with nutrients, they hope nutrigenomics will be able to help give personalised dietary advice based on gene types. Abroad, companies like Nutrilite are now unleashing nutritional supplements based on nutrigenetics research. Sharma's company Nutri-Health Systems is also now designing programmes based on nutrigenetics.

But amidst all the hype and hope, Sharma also sounds a word of caution. She says as the field explodes, quality checks are failing. Today, given that nutrition is becoming an exciting career, she points out how the courses need to be strengthened.

But the obsession with health and counting the calories isn't about to fade in a hurry. So, for a long time to come, the star nutritionists should have plenty on their plate.

Photographs by Jagan Negi and Rupinder Sharma

Earlier, nutrition in India revolved around food deficiencies, but now it's also about weight loss and fighting obesity

