

My friend Tom

Dr Sanjiva Wijesinha's anecdote provides a humorous twist to the challenges of convincing patients with diabetes to change their diets.

Tom Slater has been my patient – and my friend – since I first started working for the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in Melbourne. He is a huge specimen of a man, weighing all of 140 kg, and during his interesting life of 67 years he has done a number of jobs. A varied and colourful career has seen him cutting sugar cane in Queensland, playing rugby league for Wigan in England, selling pharmaceuticals for a drug company in Sydney and working for Gough Whitlam's office in Canberra as an Aboriginal liaison officer.

The first time I met Tom, I introduced myself: 'Good morning, Mr Slater, I'm Dr Sanjiva, the new doctor'.

'G'day, mate', he said, 'just call me Tom'.

The battle for dietary change

The next week when Tom came to the clinic, he said, 'G'day, Rajah'. I gently reminded him that my name was Sanjiva, not Rajah, to which he replied 'Can I call you Rajah? It's easier to remember.'

Having been born and christened in Sri Lanka, I have spent many years in parts of the world far from the land of my birth, and I've made it a point of principle not to allow mentally lazy folk I meet to shorten my name for their convenience. In the case of Tom, however, I decided that I would make an exception.

'Sure, Tom, you can call me Rajah. It's a good name, because in my language, Sinhalese, it means King!'

'Oh', he said, 'the only reason that I can remember the name Rajah is because there was once a famous racehorse in Melbourne called Rajah Sahib'.

Thus began our friendship – and my frustrating battle to get Tom to look after his diabetes.

Religiously, Tom used to take the diabetic tablets and nightly insulin injections that I prescribed him, but his blood sugars were seldom in the normal range because he was quite oblivious to the fact that, as a diabetic, he needed to control his



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diet. Many were the times I found him tucking into a large dim sim or hot dog or sausage roll from the health service canteen, and when I questioned him about it, he would always reply, 'But, Rajah, I took all my tablets this morning'.

A taste of success

Gradually, I managed to convince Tom to change his eating habits and try to lose weight. I told him about the benefits of eating more beans, salads, chickpeas and fruits and less white bread, doughnuts and sausages. I noticed that he didn't patronise the canteen (with its array of cakes and pastries and fried foods) any more, and I began to think that we would gradually be able to get his 140 kg down to a more respectable weight.

About a month later when I came in early to the clinic one morning, there was Tom, chatting to the canteen staff and tucking into a huge bacon and egg sandwich with obvious relish.

'Tom', I said, rather severely, 'what do you think you are doing?'

My friend looked at me sheepishly, with his mouth full of calories and cholesterol. 'I am eating a bacon and egg sandwich, Rajah.'

'I know, Tom, I can see that', I replied, sternly, 'but why on earth are you eating this monstrously fat sandwich, when I have told you to be careful about your diet?'

'Because', he grinned, 'I didn't realise you were going to come in so early today and see me!'

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