



## THE BOOK THAT PROVOKED ACCUSATIONS OF SELLING OUT

Before anyone had read his new book, Dr Rangan Chatterjee was already criticised for writing it. He tells *Louise Wates* why it is his best, and what he would tell his younger, medical student self

**W**hen Dr Rangan Chatterjee and I last spoke, he had just finished recording a second series of the BBC's *Doctor in the House* and was busy writing his first book. Three years on, he has three best-selling books, a podcast that reaches a worldwide audience of 350,000 listeners each week, and is a

co-educator on a successful lifestyle medicine-focused course for doctors. By the time this issue of *Optimum Nutrition* is out, I fully expect his fourth book, *Feel Great Lose Weight*, to be on the best seller list as well. It is, he feels, his best book yet.

“Of course I’m biased,” he says. “But

if I don’t think that now after spending nine months of slogging to try to get it done, what would have been the point?”

When we meet online during the November lockdown, it’s his first press interview and Chatterjee is as proud as a new dad who hopes his baby will do good in the world — even though the

baby hasn't been entirely welcomed.

"I had some criticism from some of my hardcore followers saying, 'really surprised you've written a book like this'," he says. "Which is interesting because they've not read [it] yet."

The cause of this displeasure is Chatterjee's venture into the world of weight loss which, because of the industry surrounding celebrity diets, is often perceived as encouraging fad diets while cashing in on success.

Has he been accused of selling out?

"One hundred per cent," he says. "I've had to wrestle with this because I think that is the perception some people have, and some people have sent me some quite nasty DMs [direct messages] about this."

### "I want sustainable change"

Sticking to health and wellbeing and avoiding weight loss would have been the "safe" option, he says, but he wanted to reach people who would never usually pick up such a book.

"There's an audience out there who will only pick up diet books every January. I need them to pick up my book and not a celebrity diet book," he says. He hopes that once people start reading it, they will realise there is more to it than weight loss. The title, he adds, was very important to him because of its emphasis on feeling well — notably, on the cover, *Feel Great* is in bold type. And while writing it took him out of his comfort zone, it was a risk he felt he had to take.

"If I want to change [people's health] I need to reach those communities and populations who will go round the supermarket on the second of January thinking 'which diet book am I going to pick up off the shelf?'"

"I want them to pick up this book. I want them to have access to holistic health and wellbeing because most of the books they're picking up are giving them the 21-day diet plan, the punishing workout regime, the drop a dress size in two weeks narrative. Those can work for some people, but my approach is to help people, yes, in January but also in February, March, April, May. I want sustainable change for people."

The book, he says, and his entire career — whether television, books or podcasts — has resulted from him following his passion for health and wellbeing. "This is something that people probably aren't aware of," he says. "I

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have very powerful emotional reasons that have driven me to really try and help change the health landscape and help people improve their lives."

He has spoken about one of those reasons before. As a baby, his son suffered a hypocalcaemia-induced convulsion, which is a symptom of low calcium levels that can be caused by vitamin D deficiency. Despite his training, Chatterjee hadn't known a vitamin deficiency could cause something so serious and was shocked by the event. It was a powerful trigger to learn more about nutrition. And while it might be easier to sidestep the issue of weight, the pandemic as an event on its own has highlighted just how much of a problem it is for health and wellbeing.

### Fresh approach, old problem

"I think once the dust settles, and who knows when that will be, I feel a lot of people are going to go 'right ok we get it, if you are overweight or obese your chances of getting ill from COVID-19 or anything else are dramatically increased'."

This new book, he says, is a fresh approach to the old problem of weight. "The narrative around weight often tends to be 'you should do this, you should be eating this'. Most people who are trying to lose weight or trying to improve their health, they kind of know that too much sugar or biscuits and crisps in front of Netflix every evening is not helping them. But they're still doing it. So, for a lot of people 'what we eat' is not a problem. It's 'why we eat'."

The pandemic, he says, is a case in point. "Is it called the corona stone? Essentially, a lot of people have been putting on weight. There was an article in *The Guardian*... that showed chocolate sales are up 50% — and that says it all. We have had one of the most stressful years in living memory and, for many people, the way we dealt with that is to eat more — I did, and I promote health and wellbeing. But it was serving a purpose for me, it was helping me deal with what was going on in society."

It is perhaps this ability to relate to others who are struggling that has helped to make Chatterjee so successful. When we met in 2017, I had told him

about noticing a young mum on the bus feeding a large, sugary doughnut to her small child, and had asked him what he thought. Instead of giving me a lovely sound bite about the evils of sugar, he had responded thoughtfully that the mum would have been trying to do the best she could at that time, and how difficult it is to eat well in our modern environment — a problem he discusses in the new book.

### The Three Fs

People don't need a new diet, he says. They need to understand why they make choices. The book sets out a 'freedom exercise', called 'The Three Fs', designed to deal with this.

"The first F is feel; what are you feeling? Are you hungry or have you just had a row with your partner? Have you had a crap day at work? The second F is feed; how does food feed that feeling? The third F is find; can you find an alternative behaviour to sooth that feeling?"

It's an exercise Chatterjee uses with his patients but calls 'The Three Fs' in the book to help it stick in people's heads. "I think it's the most important exercise," he says. "It's helped me and I don't have to lose weight."

The book also addresses how social pressures can influence food choices, sharing his own experience. "Back in the days when we could go out with our friends and do things...we were sitting in a Thai restaurant and my mate made some disparaging comment, 'Oh Rangan's going to do his healthy thing now and not have dessert'. At the time I felt a bit uncomfortable and thought I'll just have it so I'm like everyone else — you know, we want to fit in." He didn't have dessert in the end, but understands the pressures.

"I will have dessert plenty of times, I just didn't want it on that day," he says. "I think you've really got to understand that the problem isn't with you, it's with that other person. If you're out and other people are drinking [alcohol] but you choose not to drink, you can make people feel uncomfortable. Why should someone else be uncomfortable whether I have an alcoholic drink or not?"

"I think you've got to realise that it's the other people's insecurities that are showing up. What you do shouldn't affect anyone else at all." However, because of the many emotions involved,

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### "The only way you make long term changes [is] with empowerment where you feel in charge of your body"

he says he wouldn't get into arguments over it.

Chatterjee suggests this is an experience to which nutritional therapists (NTs) may relate. "NTs, a lot of them have had life experiences or events that have driven them to study to be a nutritional therapist," he says. "Then they make different choices and their old friends are sort of like 'You used to always do this, what's going on?'"

For him, it was another life event that led to him giving up dairy. "My son has a proper allergy to cow's milk. We only discovered that when he was six or seven months old and he came out in a massive rash and wheals. In Bengali culture we have something called a rice eating ceremony. At six months you get fed your first grain of rice, but it was put in a milky solution that my mum had prepared. For us as a family...we made the decision if he can't have it then we're not going to have it."

It was a change that led to unexpected benefits. "A lot of mucus and breathing issues I'd previously had all got better. I feel better by and large when I don't have dairy so, generally speaking, I avoid it."

#### An individual approach

But just because this works for him, Chatterjee doesn't think people should copy him. "What I hope my book does is give people a framework and guidance to start experimenting for themselves.

"I think it's in the penultimate paragraph, when I say 'when your friends ask you what plan you're following, you can tell them you aren't following anyone else's plan because you've been empowered to create your own'. I was so proud of that. I thought that's it, that's the essence that I've been looking for.

"I don't want people to think they're following Dr Chatterjee's plan. The only way you make long term changes [is] with empowerment where you feel in charge of your body."

It's an individual approach that is also taken by nutritional therapy. "I love nutritional therapists," he says. "I think they've got really great training and I think a lot of them understand this stuff really, really well." *Prescribing Lifestyle Medicine*, the course he runs with Dr Ayan Panja, an NHS GP, and Mike Ash, a registered nutritional therapist who qualified at ION, which publishes *Optimum Nutrition*, has been extremely

successful but is not aimed at making nutritional therapists redundant. "We're not teaching nutrition...We are teaching the principles of lifestyle medicine. We're talking about referring to nutritional therapists, to health coaches."

So, while ION's graduate diploma is for clinicians who want to incorporate nutrition into their practice, Chatterjee and his colleagues deliver their course to train doctors in the principles of lifestyle medicine so that they know when to refer on to other practitioners. "People say 'why do you teach about nutrition when we've already got dietitians or nutritional therapists?', and the point I always make is: listen, if doctors don't understand how powerful nutrition can be for a variety of different conditions, we're never even going to refer on to a nutrition professional.

"We understand the various treatment modalities so we know where we can refer on. But if you don't know the Smiles Trial — how changing your diet for 12 weeks can induce remission in some cases of depression — you're never going to refer on to a nutrition expert when a patient comes in with depression.

"We're giving case studies showing just how powerful nutrition can be. And I think for nutritional therapists, that's going to lead — and it already is, I think, leading — to a lot more referrals from doctors. Time will tell, but I hope nutritional therapy gets a lot more of the limelight going forward."

#### Dietary wars

Yet nutrition, he says, can be a very divisive subject, despite what he describes as a "groundswell movement" of demand from doctors and medical students to understand it more.

"We have such dietary wars...over what is the right diet, and I really find it problematic because it becomes very divisive. You start posting about nutrition, it's like you're posting about religion. I can talk about stress, mindset, sleep, movement and [responses are] all pretty supportive. You post about nutrition, man, it's like lighting a flame."

Whatever works for people, he says, is great. He doesn't want to dictate what anyone should do; just help people discover what may be best for them.

#### To Rangan, the medical student

Chatterjee has come a long way since he first qualified; something, he says, he never anticipated. Does he have imposter

syndrome?

"I do," he says. "It's getting better. I always get these pangs — who the hell are you? What makes you an expert on this topic and why should anyone listen to my show or read my books? I get it less now and the podcast has really taught me this — I'm just being me now."

When asked what he would have told Rangan the medical student, he pauses to reflect. "I'd say: listen, go to your lectures, learn what you're being asked to learn. But understand that what you're being taught is only one part of the picture. You're being taught something that worked very well in a different health landscape.

"Acute medicine, 40 or 50 years ago when most of the problems we saw as doctors were acute problems, they responded very well to our medical model: isolating, reductionism, finding one thing and giving a pill to solve that problem. But just be aware, young Rangan, that the health landscape has changed, that actually a lot of what you are going to see when you qualify is driven by our collected modern lifestyles.

"So, learn the tools and stay open minded so you can learn new tools. And be open minded to learn from other healthcare professionals who've got different expertise. Listen to what they're telling you and, most importantly, don't think you know it all just because you've been to medical school. Your patients are likely to teach you more than you teach them.

"I don't know if he'd listen!" he adds, smiling.

He adds that he'd also ask the 19-year-old Rangan why he went to medical school, before answering his own question. "I went to medical school to learn skills that would help me improve other people's lives. Well it just so happens I can impact people's lives a lot more now than I've ever been able to in my entire career. As a GP I can see maybe 40 people in a day? How many of them can I truly help? I'm reaching hundreds of thousands of people a year and so I kind of feel this is being a doctor. It's just not the sort of doctor I thought I was going to be."



DR RANGAN CHATTERJEE

Feel Great Lose Weight is out now

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