

PARADISE LOST,

Nutritionist fights poor eating habits in the Marshall Islands.

Brenda Davis



by Teresa Pitman

A COUNTRY MADE UP of tropical islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean sounds like paradise, but for many people native to the Marshall Islands, life is far from idyllic. Yes, there are palm trees and sunlit sandy beaches, but in the streets of the inhabited islands, the devastating effects of poor nutrition are obvious.

Middle-aged men use makeshift wheelchairs because they've had a leg amputated below the knee. A pilot is told he must retire at age 38 because diabetes is affecting his eyesight. A woman is bedridden for a year after a diabetes-related stroke. Young children are often malnourished, but they are picking up poor eating habits that will eventually lead them down the same path as their parents.

The epidemic of obesity and Type II diabetes is often thought of as something affecting primarily North Americans. But it's hit hard in this rather obscure group of Pacific

islands and atolls, roughly halfway between New Zealand and Hawaii, where more than half of those over age 35 have Type II diabetes. Most adults are obese, and the most common surgeries performed are amputations due to complications of diabetes.

Obesity and related diseases are, it seems, unexpectedly contagious. Until World War II, the Islanders lived primarily on the foods they could grow and the fish they caught from the ocean, but during the war the islands became a strategic location for the U.S. Navy. The once fit and healthy people gradually came to depend on imported, processed foods — with tragic results.

When Brenda Davis was asked to help reverse this trend, she found that the most popular breakfasts for Marshall Islands kids were popsicles and soft drinks, or packaged ramen noodles sprinkled with sugary Kool-Aid powder.

Davis is a dietitian, a diabetes expert and

a 1982 Guelph graduate in applied human nutrition. She started her career working in public health in her home province of Ontario, but turned to teaching and nutrition consulting when she moved to British Columbia with her husband, Paul, a 1981 B.Sc. graduate in biological science. He works for the Worker's Compensation Board in occupational health; they have two children.

Davis found that the Marshall Islanders had little education about nutrition, so they focused on simply filling their stomachs with the foods most readily available to them. That meant the main sources of calories in their diets were white rice, white bread, donuts and other baked goods, Spam and other canned meat, chicken, ramen noodles, soft drinks and salty snacks like potato chips. As Davis says: "It would be difficult to design a diet that would more efficiently induce diabetes than the diet that has been adopted by the Marshallese people."