



DIABETES
champions

CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE,

CHANGE YOUR Life

By Tammy Burns

Dr. Ali Zentner, of *Village on a Diet* fame, wants to know who's in control—your diabetes or you?

To Dr. Ali Zentner's patients, the woman they watched on CBC's *Village on a Diet* wasn't just a persona on a television show. It was really her, and her passion for healthy living came shining through.

Dr. Zentner's no-nonsense, supportive attitude on the show earned her a slew of fans across Canada. And even though the final episode aired back in March, she continues to receive fan mail from viewers who have been inspired to start their own weight loss journeys.

As a doctor of internal medicine and expert in obesity for the past 10 years, Dr. Zentner (or Dr. Ali, as she was affectionately known on the show) spends her days with those who are highly at risk for developing diabetes or, in many cases, who are already there. As such, she understands firsthand the devastating complications that can arise from the disease. She is also painfully aware of how prevalent diabetes is in Canada, and says she diagnoses at least one new patient with diabetes a week. It's a sobering thought, especially for someone so committed to fighting obesity and diabetes.

But Dr. Zentner embraces the challenge. In her practice, she sees people from that first diagnosis through to treatment, all the while emphasizing that they can control their health—not the other way around.

"I try to convey to them that this does not have to be a devastating disease," she says. "That, sure, absolutely, diabetes sucks. But it doesn't have to own them. I had one patient say the most amazing thing. She said, 'I realized that my diabetes didn't own me. I had to own it.' And that has really resonated in my practice. I try to inspire patients to own this disease, to embrace some of the healthy lifestyle aspects of everyday living and see the huge impact that it really does make."

"If you surround yourself every day with the kind of stories that inspire you, you have no choice but to continue on your own path to health."

If anyone knows how possible that is, it's Dr. Zentner. While she doesn't have diabetes herself, she has struggled with her weight since childhood. After several years of yo-yo dieting throughout her teens and twenties, her weight took full control in medical school, ballooning to 326 pounds. Once she finished her residency, she realized she had to address her own health and, in a way, she became her own first patient. She began to focus on nutrition and physiology, and began to apply the advice she gave to patients to herself, as well.

Since graduating medical school, Dr. Zentner has lost 175 pounds and continues to practice what she preaches. She even finds she feeds off the inspiration her clients give her, using their stories and successes as motivation for pursuing her own health goals.

“There are days I don’t feel like working out or I don’t feel like doing what I’ve got to do,” she says. “But I go into the office and hear someone’s incredible story or what they’ve done, and it’s pretty inspiring. If you surround yourself every day with the kind of stories that inspire you, you have no choice but to continue on your own path to health.”



Even though *Village on a Diet* has ended, Dr. Zentner continues to devote her time to battling diabetes and obesity and encouraging healthy, active lifestyles.

In August, she embarked on a cross-country bike trip, from Vancouver to Halifax, as part of the “Cycle 4 What Matters National Relay Ride”. The purpose of the trip was to raise awareness and funds for diabetes and diabetes research. As she puts it, it was a chance to take her message to the streets—literally. It was a big trip but, for Dr. Zentner, it was merely a small step in the battle against the disease.

“This cross-country experience was not the end, and it’s not the beginning. It’s merely a continuation,” she says.

“Obesity is to diabetes what earthquakes are to tsunamis. So, we better get good at treating obesity or we better get great at treating diabetes.”

Zentner is also vocal about the state of Canadian healthcare, and is worried that our system isn’t devoted enough to preventative care. She says that only five percent of our healthcare dollars are spent on prevention and that, while we may say our country is focused on encouraging disease prevention, we’re not doing enough about it. And that could have a crippling snowball effect. “Obesity is to diabetes what earthquakes are to tsunamis,” she says. “So, we better get good at treating obesity or we better get *great* at treating diabetes.”

For Dr. Zentner, controlling diabetes, and controlling your life, is a matter of shifting your perspective, and she feels everyone has the power within them to shape their lives. “We can always strive for more,” she says. “We don’t have to settle for whatever lots we’re given in life, whether it’s diabetes or heart disease or obesity, anything. We never have to settle for just the diagnosis.”

Tammy Burns is a freelance writer and editor based in Toronto, Ontario.

Pedipharm
1/2 Page Ad