'Paleo’ Diet and Lifestyle: After 30 Years, Is There Any Science Left in All the Hype?

In 1985 S. Boyd Eaton and Konner published an article in The New England Journal of Medicine called “Paleolithic Nutrition: A Consideration of It's Nature and Current Implications,” viewed as one of the early contributions to evolutionary medicine. Along with other papers and a book, it proposed a discordance or mismatch between current environments and those our genomes evolved in, to account for epidemic chronic degenerative disease. Today, so-called “Paleo” diets, based on dubious evidence, are a widespread fad. Did Eaton and Konner create a Frankenstein monster? What if anything in their model remains true? Konner will address the “Paleo” fad as well as these more serious challenges: 1) that we mischaracterized the hunter-gatherer diet; 2) that research has undermined our claims about the causes of disease; 3) that we underestimated post-Paleolithic genetic evolution; 4) that paleopathology reveals atherosclerosis in ancient populations; and 5) that hunter-gatherers do not differ from “sedentary” Westerners in energy throughput. The fad leaves much to be desired, but the death of the mismatch model has been greatly exaggerated. It predicts that a range of diets will work, but excludes certain common modern patterns.

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Lunch will be served at 11:45am
Please RSVP at evmed.asu.edu/upcoming-events

Melvin (Mel) Konner teaches anthropology and behavioral biology at Emory University. His MD and PhD are from Harvard, where he also taught. He did field research for two years among !Kung San (Bushman) hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari in Botswana. His eleven books include The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit; Becoming a Doctor; Why the Reckless Survive, and Other Secrets of Human Nature; The Jewish Body; The Evolution of Childhood: Relationships, Emotion, Mind; and most recently, Women After All: Sex, Evolution, and the End of Male Supremacy. He is a co-author of The Paleolithic Prescription, the first book about the so-called “Paleo” diet. He is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and has written for Nature, Science, The New England Journal of Medicine, Child Development, The New York Review of Books, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, and many other publications both scientific and general. He has testified twice at U.S. Senate hearings related to health care. His website is www.melvinkonner.com.