

## Let's get physical

Toronto FP Melissa Hershberg's less than a year out of med school but already she's got her own diet (The Hershberg Diet), started an EMR software company and landed a job at a prestigious downtown Toronto clinic. And she's not even 30 yet. *NRM* caught up with the former Miss Fitness Manitoba to talk about eating disorders, being mistaken for the receptionist and the secret life of lettuce.



**You're really, really young and really, really successful — do people totally hate you?** No, but sometimes I get people assuming I'm the nurse or the receptionist. They're shocked to find out this young blonde-haired girl is their doctor. But they get over it pretty quickly.

**On top of all that other stuff, you also keep up your gymnastics training.** When I was a teenager, I trained 25 hours per week in the gym. That's what made me so good at managing my time.

**Doesn't sound like you had much time to be a wild child.** I used to be a big partier, but not anymore.

**Why'd you pick the white coat over the leotard?** Once you're 15 you're done in gymnastics. It's not like golf.

**But you still do gymnastics?** After university I was looking for another sport where I could use my gymnastics so I got into fitness training, which is kind of gymnastics combined with dance. I entered a fitness competition and became Miss Fitness Manitoba. They wanted me to go on to compete nationally, but I went to medical school instead.

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**Can you do a back flip?** Yes, I can.

**Very cool. Is that your best move?** Yeah, probably. I can stand on my hands for a couple of minutes, too.

**Are eating disorders completely entrenched in gymnastics?** Yeah, whenever you're being judged there is pressure to stay thin and stay fit. Also, the leaner you are, the easier it is to do tumbling routines.

**Did you have to deal with that pressure?** I never had a problem with an eating disorder when I was in training. I could eat whatever I wanted and I'd just burn it off. But when I was 15 I had a knee injury and I put on 20 pounds over six months because my body wasn't used to being inactive and I was an adolescent and didn't know how to eat properly.

**Did you become anorexic?** I definitely struggled with unhealthy eating habits. That's what prompted my whole interest in nutrition and preventive health.

**That brings us to your diet book. According to the jacket, the secret to dieting success is "the 4th macronutrient"? Sounds like something picked up on the Mars mission.** Most people are familiar with just three macronutrients — proteins, carbohydrates and fats. The fourth is water. I teach people how to eat water-rich foods. Those foods fill you up, but with fewer calories.

**Like watermelon and cucumbers. I get it. Your diet also recommends something called "hotty" foods. Is that because they'll make me look hotter?** It's about thermogenesis but that's a mouthful to say and it sounds too scientific so I call it the hotty effect. When we eat certain foods, our body is encouraged to burn calories. It's hard for the body to burn hotty foods, so our body burns fat instead. It takes no work for the body to work through carbs and fat, but meat — a hotty food — has more chemical bonds so it's harder for the body to break down.

**Hm, sounds like another diet I know. Do you see yourself as the next Atkins?** Yeah, I do. Right now, there's no female Canadian physician who's advocating for weight loss. I hope to be that person.

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**Like you said, most of the diets are written by men. Do you take a different approach as a woman?** I think it's an advantage. Women's intuition, I definitely have that. Also, people are harder on women about how they look. I've been there. I know the emotional battle they go through about not liking how they look.

**Do you practise what you preach?** I'm exactly the same as all my patients, so it's tough. I love sweets and junk and cookies and pretzels. I love it all, but I also like to feel good. When I go out with my friends, I have the cake. I let myself indulge in the things I love. You are going to mess up and cheat — there are days I eat terribly and I mess up, but it's about committing yourself to a new lifestyle.

**Coincidentally, this is our Practice Management special issue. You recently helped found a web-based EMR program.** Yep, it's called Biopod.

**Let me guess, low-cal medical records?** My incentive for creating it is it will be free for physicians to use. Right now lots of FPs are pressured to go to e-charting, and they'll have to put thousands of dollars into it. I don't think it's fair to make doctors pay all this money to have a better practice management tool. I wanted to create a bare bones system for people who don't know how to start or can't afford an expensive system.

**A free EMR... there must be a catch. Are there lots of ads?** Maybe later if a lot of docs start using it. Right now, doctors can charge patients to use the system, 40 or 50 bucks a year and part comes back to Biopod. That could actually be a source of revenue for doctors. The initial goal was to create something for the patient — they don't remember all their meds, they don't carry copies of EKGs, they don't remember their whole past medical history — but I think that is sort of creative thinking to incentivize GPs. Doctors need to be rewarded rather than told to spend \$25,000 to get a system — that's backward.

**What's with the name?** [Laughs] You know like iPod, and Bio is life. It's cutting-edge, something you can carry around in your hand.

**Any threatening calls from Apple yet about the name?** No, no.

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*Interview conducted by Sam Solomon*

## 5 things you didn't know about... Melissa Hershberg

**Why she insists her patients call her Dr Melissa** 'Dr Hershberg' still sounds like my father-in-law to me.

**What's on her iPod** Fergie (from The Black Eyed Peas) and Gwen Stefani

**If she were to team up with a celebrity chef, she'd pick...** Jamie Oliver. I could hold my own with him — I can be tough. And I like his little lisp.

**Her fave place to eat the 4th macronutrient in Toronto** The Lettuce Eatery. Actually they're launching a salad based on the Hershberg diet, called the H2O. I think it has blue cheese and apples in it.

**What she's reading** My guilty pleasure is celebrity magazines. If I want to veg out that's what I read.

