In this issue of *Health Science*, I am pleased to include my recent interview with Dr. Michael Klaper of TrueNorth Health and share with you his extraordinary journey from being a simple “Vegan MD” to a gifted Hygienic Physician who I believe takes his place alongside some of the greatest Hygienic Physicians in the 65-year history of our Association. I think you will see that he has the drive, commitment, confidence and enthusiasm of Drs. Shelton, Benesh, Gross and Scott and the scholarship, temperament and wisdom of Drs. Burton, Esser and Sidhwa.

We are very fortunate that he has found his home (or “true north”) at Dr. Goldhamer’s great facility in Santa Rosa. We are also honored that he has become a leading voice for the NHA.

I see from your biography that you received your medical degree from the University of Illinois. Are you from the Illinois/Wisconsin area?

I sure am. I was born and grew up in Chicago, I went to high school in Chicago and went to the University of Illinois at Champaign Urbana for my premed, and then up to medical school at the University of Illinois. I spent my first 12 summers on my uncle’s dairy farm in Wisconsin, and until I started college, spent any free time I had hiking the forest trails of Michigan and Wisconsin and canoeing the lakes and rivers of Minnesota. I’m a Midwest guy.

I seem to recall that T. Colin Campbell and Caldwell Esselstyn grew up on dairy farms, too. Is there some kind of kinship here?

I think the three of us are all farm boys!

Did you always want to be a doctor?

Yes, I did. When I was a kid on the farm, my summers were full of animals — the cows and the calves in the barn as well as the wild animals, hawks, frogs and foxes and deer — and I became very aware of the natural world at an early age. I was always one of those guys who wanted to make sure that everybody was okay. I would find injured animals, and if a sheep would break its leg on the farm, I would splint its leg up. If a snake had a frog in its mouth, I would pull the frog out, glue its skin closed and look after it until it recovered, and then I’d release it back to the wild. (But some part of me would feel badly for the snake, as well!)

Then why didn’t you become a vet?

I suppose I like people too much and I guess I felt intimidated not being able to deal with patients who couldn’t talk to me and tell me what the problem was. My dad was
a dentist, my brother was a biology teacher, my niece is a fresh-water biologist — so there is clearly “life sciences” in our blood.

For most people, there is something that points them in our health direction. Was there a book you read, a lecture you attended or a health crisis that you suffered that caused you to examine all the things that you were taught in school?

Oh my, that’s quite a question. Of course, I’m a child of the 60s; I grew up in the 50s and became of age in the 60s. In the 50s, you didn’t question authority. When the guy in the white shirt and tie said to do something, you did it. But we all saw in the 60s and 70s that maybe authority doesn’t always know what it is doing. Just because it’s been said by someone in authority, maybe it’s not so. And as I got into medicine I began to see that some of the dogma that I had been taught was definitely “not necessarily so.”

When I went to medical school I was taught that when a patient has diabetes, “nobody gets off insulin.” And folks with high blood pressure “will take pills for that for the rest of their lives.” Well, I soon learned that, and many other “truths,” had a way of revealing other aspects of themselves that led to different conclusions.

It really began with my own personal evolution that brought me to a new way of thinking for ethical reasons: I wanted to get the violence out of my life and adopt a truly non-violent lifestyle. One night while pontificating over my pursuit of a non-violent lifestyle over steak dinner with a friend, he leaned forward and said, “This is all very nice, Michael, but if you really want to eliminate the violence in your life, you might want to start with that piece of flesh on your plate — because your desire for that taste of meat in your mouth is paying for the death of an animal.” When he said that, a little voice inside me said, “You know, he’s right.” And it didn’t take long before my leather shoes had to go, along with milk, cheese and everything else in my life with hidden violence attached that I could jettison, or at least, modify. I became vegan in my diet, lost 20 pounds, and saw my borderline high blood pressure drop to normal levels along with a reduction in my cholesterol levels. I then began applying this to my patients — and they saw the same great results.

Your early claim to fame was that you were the only vegan MD. If I remember right you wrote a book Vegan Nutrition: Pure and Simple that was more “vegan” than “nutrition.” Am I right?

The book was just to help people get the meat out of their diet. In the 80s my knowledge of nutrition was very primitive as reflected in that book. That’s why the book is out of print and I refer people to other vegan author’s books these days.

From what I read, your professional practice has been quite a journey, too. You directed a vegan health spa in Pompano Beach then somehow ended up in New Zealand, then Hawaii.

Yes, I went to New Zealand and worked there for three years running a large urgent care unit. I got homesick and came back home.

Not a health practice, per se?

No, it was not a health practice per se. They came in fat, sick and bleeding. They left not bleeding, but still fat and sick!

What about Hawaii?

I lived on Maui for eleven years, caring for my mother who had developed dementia at the end of her life. Maui is such a lovely place. I had a general practice and it was far more health-oriented. I had a radio show called “Sounds of Healing” through which I tried to communicate a plant-based message. I did practice a more health-based medicine there, but I still did a lot of “blood and guts” urgent care work, as well. The medical system is not set up to pay doctors for nutritional counseling to keep people well, and thus, to prevent disease. Only if people are already sick or injured, THEN you get paid. Hence, I did my private practice nutritional counseling for the “highest good” for my patients, but did urgent care work to pay the rent.

Now you have landed at TrueNorth. Clearly your perspective on veganism and health has evolved. Tell me about that evolution.

As I said, back in the 80s I was just happy to get people to eat spaghetti instead of steak. I was mostly focused on the animals and the environment. And when they did substitute the spaghetti for the steak, they generally got better. But I’ve been a vegan doctor now for almost 30 years and I noticed that not all of my vegans were healthy. I had some that were overweight, some had persistent high blood pressure, and some had high cholesterol and high triglycerides. They would say “I’m vegan, why aren’t I lean and healthy with normal numbers?”

It was a puzzle to me, as well, and it set me off on my nutrition journey to really get serious about this and try to understand the big picture. I was reading everything I could and searching lots of literature when some marvelous allies appeared: Dr. John McDougall, Dr. Michael Greger, Dr. Matt Lettman, and Dr. Esselstyn. Their words started filtering through that vegan is not enough. I learned that processed foods are not healthy, and, as delicious as they are, the veggie burgers are still full of salt, sugar and oil.

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and are highly processed. So basically it came down to the processed foods. You must stick with whole plant foods. Like Dr. Hans Diehl says, “Eat food as grown.” Eat potatoes — not potato chips. Eat corn on the cob — not corn chips. If you eat it much as it is growing in the field you win the game. So the term whole-food, plant-based diet really has become one of my main mantras.

How did you find your way to TrueNorth?
I have known Dr. Alan Goldhamer for 25 years and he had been trying to get me to join his staff here from day one, but I always had other things to do. I was off to Hawaii and New Zealand and other adventures. However, I always knew he was an ally and time has a way of bringing things full circle. When I came back from New Zealand I had to look around to see where I was going to land and I came to Santa Rosa, California, and Alan asked me to one of his weekly staff meetings. It felt like slipping on an old shoe. It just felt so comfortable to be on the staff with five other vegan physicians where nutrition is not a dirty word — where plant-based nutrition is the norm. What a pleasure it is to deal with patients who are motivated. When they walk through the TrueNorth door, they have been pre-screened and they know they have to make some changes. So when Alan finally made me an offer to join the TrueNorth staff in 2009, I accepted and I’m very, very happy here.

I imagine fasting was something you never dealt with but now at TrueNorth Health Center, you are dealing with it as a centerpiece of care. That has got to be quite a new vista for you.
I had no idea what a powerful modality water fasting is. If there was a pill that lowered your high blood pressure, cleared out your insulin receptors so diabetes resolved, helped you lose weight, cooled off inflammatory arthritis and inflammatory bowel disease, cleared migraine headaches, improved asthma — we would all be rich beyond our dreams. But, as little as 10, but certainly 14 days, 21 days or longer on water does all those things, and more. What a powerful modality!

What is the power of fasting and why does it work?
I think its power is both what it has and what it doesn’t have. Let’s start with what it doesn’t have. As you well know, the standard American diet that most people eat is dangerously pathogenic, that is, it really causes disease. People eat bacon and eggs for breakfast, cheeseburgers for lunch, chicken for dinner — and, as a result, wave after wave of fat, sugar, and inflammatory proteins go through their bloodstream. From there, it settles in their fat cells and their arteries, increasing their insulin and raising their blood pressure. Well, on a water fast, that damaging chain of events is removed. The fat clears out of the blood, the inflammatory markers start coming down, and the body begins to heal on a deep level. If you don’t keep hitting yourself in the hand with the hammer, eventually your hand heals. If you stop the repeated biochemical insults from food, the body begins to heal and the fasting state optimizes those healing forces.

So, taking away these negative influences is extremely important. On a fast, people are drinking water only, and day after day, they are washing water through their tissues. It’s like taking your cells through a car wash. You have to understand that in our cells, we have remnant molecules of every restaurant and fast food meal we have eaten — along with all the preservatives, colorings and flavorings, stabilizers and dough conditioners, etc., that are packed into so many processed foods. On a water fast, day after day, water washes through your cells and washes those contaminants away. So after a prolonged period on water only, people feel light and clean and energetic and, surprisingly, they are not hungry. That last fact is amazing to most people. You would think that, on a water fast, people are going to be tired, hungry and cold, laying on a bed, miserable. In fact, hunger usually disappears about day four or five, energy levels increase, and people feel light and energetic. It’s a remarkable thing to see.

Is what you are describing the same phenomena that the early Natural Hygiene Practitioners called “detoxifying?”
Absolutely. All those chemical substances from modern cuisine that I mentioned are in our cells and they create the chemical toxicity responsible for much dietary-derived ill
health. With all the fast food diets that especially the kids and obese people are eating, they are loading themselves up with chemicals that have never been seen in the human body before in all of human history. Absolutely, I think that’s responsible for a lot of toxicity we see in medical practice, but label as “disease.” And it may have pharmaceutical effects. Excessive salt makes your arteries more stiff and makes you retain fluid, which raises blood pressure. Dietary animal fats and refined vegetable oils also raise your blood pressure and clog your insulin receptors. I would call those toxic effects of these molecules. And when you wash those contaminants out of your cells during a fast, there is definitely detoxification going on. The body doesn’t want to be clogged up. It doesn’t want to be inflamed. During a fast, it reverts to its normal, healthy state.

**What conditions have you been most impressed with that recover well from fasting?**

Oh, great question! When someone comes in with high blood pressure I know that after 21 days on water, they almost surely are not going to have high blood pressure. When someone comes in with type 2 diabetes, we will generally be able to take them off their insulin immediately because their blood sugar is going to come down promptly on a fast, followed then by a whole-foods, plant-based diet. Migraine headache is another condition that responds very well to fasting. Predictably, no one complains of a migraine during a fast, and if they don’t start eating processed junk food after the fast, the migraines generally don’t come back — of course, depending on their stress level.

Asthma is another condition that is often made worse by certain proteins, especially in dairy products. When you pull those out, the water consumed on a fast makes the bronchial mucus thin and it is easily eliminated from the now more open bronchial tubes. Most people with asthma don’t wheeze on a fast. Fasting is the most potent anti-inflammatory that I know of, so rheumatoid arthritis is another condition that improves dramatically on a fast. Joints quickly stop hurting, and it’s a thrill every day on rounds to hear people say, “Hey Doctor, I’m better than yesterday. It’s definitely getting better.” And to see these fearsome diseases dissipate without powerful anti-inflammatory, immune-suppressing medication is really remarkable to this wizened old physician!

**Why can’t people fast on their own?**

If you’re a healthy person — you’re not in kidney failure or have type 1 diabetes, or other serious problems — you can fast safely on your own for 72 hours, and up to five days. Longer than that, however, and especially if you do have medical issues like high blood pressure and type 2 diabetes, those medical conditions are going to change and you want someone medically skilled around to monitor you.

Also, as the fast goes on, blood pressure goes down, and even healthy people can stand up and get light-headed. If you don’t plan for that, people can pass out and faint. You don’t want to be alone in your apartment if that happens. In addition, some people who detoxify get terrible headaches and you don’t want to face that alone.

And when you come out of the fast — 21 days on water turns you into a dishrag — you don’t want to stand up and start cutting vegetables and juicing watermelon. You want someone to do that for you.

All the way around, you mostly need someone around for safety, and here at TrueNorth, we check people twice a day. We go in at 8:00 in the morning and 4:00 in the afternoon and say, “Hi how are you? Any nausea, headaches, light-headedness when you stand up?” We then check their pulse, temperature and blood pressure. If they look me in the eye and they are getting more nauseated and feel like they are about to vomit, we stop the fast at that point. We don’t want them vomiting. If they are on a water fast and they can’t hold water down, they might get dehydrated and end up in the ER with IVs going. You don’t want that to happen. So, on a prolonged fast, especially in the presence of serious medical conditions, you want someone around who is medically trained and experienced, and thus who knows what is serious and what isn’t.

**Is water fasting a safe process for most people?**

It is extremely safe if done properly with supervision. Most people can fast, but not if they have type 1 diabetes, kidney failure, or on medications they can’t stop such as Prednisone or antidepressants. You have to be off all medicines to fast because these medications get potentiated on a fast, and thus can produce all sorts of side effects. One exception is thyroid medication, which generally gets reduced to a half dose.

**Let’s move from fasting back to eating again. Do we make too much of food and diet as part of lifestyle or is it a bigger picture than that?**

It is certainly a bigger picture, but no, we don’t make too much of it. In fact we don’t make enough of it on every level. It is really heartrending for me to walk down any street and see who we have become as a society, with all the obesity and illnesses. As a physician, I see these horrible diseases — the obesity, the clogged arteries leading to high blood pressure, strokes, blindness and kidney failure, and so much more — and I know that the medical costs are bankrupting the country.

I see them spend billions of dollars to find the cause of

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obesity and the cause of high blood pressure and the cause of type 2 diabetes, and it makes me want to get the biggest soapbox I can find, go down to Washington, DC, and stand on it and yell, “It’s the food!!”

It’s the food we’re eating!! There’s nothing mysterious about it. So are we making too much of the food? No, we are not. We are not making enough about it. Our food choices are what is driving all of this ill-health, as well as the destruction of the planet because it all involves flesh eating. That’s the main reason why the forests are disappearing and the water supply is drying up. Yet, few want to recognize this reality.

Look at what has become “normal.” Americans eat animal flesh three times a day. Bacon and eggs for breakfast, cheeseburgers for lunch, and chicken for dinner. I tell my patients and colleagues, “Look, not even mountain lions eat flesh three times a day.” The tigers in the zoo, bona fide carnivores, don’t eat flesh three times a day. But we “naked apes” give ourselves permission for this nonstop flesh orgy — every five or six hours a piece of muscle disappears down our gullets.

The hospitals are filled with the results of this bizarre diet. If you want to cause a colon cancer, just pack your colon full of meat three times a day for 20 years and let that decompose on contact with your colon wall. Concentrated protein is toxic to the kidneys, and I believe this nonstop animal-eating is a ticket to the dialysis unit and the renal transplant list.

All this flesh eating is also driving our future — threatening environmental problems. Think about how much of our greenhouse gases come from fuel burned for flesh production. Before we say, “It’s from transportation,” think about all the trucks on the highway and what is IN them. How much of their cargo is for producing and transporting flesh — the entire agriculture and restaurant industries are in those trucks and the vast majority of what those industries are about is flesh production and consumption. It’s all about our meat-eating.

When I interviewed Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn I asked him about other aspects of health — exercise, rest, fresh air, emotional poise. His view was that diet trumps all. Do you agree or do you think it’s part of a bigger picture?

Of course, they all go together and they all affect each other. If you’re depressed, you’re not going to eat well and you’re not going to exercise. If you’re not exercising and get obese, you’re not going to want to eat well. They all feed on each other. For me, I think that nutrition is king and exercise is queen. But if you’re not happy, what’s it all for? Hopefully, happiness is the most important factor. If you are happy you will take care of your body.

Speaking of happiness, you seem like you’re really happy where you are in life right now. Is that a fair statement?

That’s a very fair statement. I’m a happy man.

This is probably another understatement of the year, but do you practice what you preach?

I certainly do. I’ve been vegan for 30 years. I work out regularly, riding my bike through the country roads of Sonoma County as often as I can. I’ve got normal blood pressure, am on no medications, and I’m a happy vegan guy!

You describe yourself as a vegan physician, but is that the most accurate description?

Just between you, me, and your readers, I don’t use the word vegan very much anymore. There is such baggage attached to that word, and it often makes non-vegans defensive. I prefer to call myself a health-promoting physician.

What is the Michael Klaper ideal diet?

I eat what we serve here at TrueNorth. Every morning I have steel-cut oatmeal with a generous helping of cut-up fruit: melon chunks, grapes, blackberries, pineapple chunks, mango slices, etc. Lunches and dinners are big salads with lots of greens, along with generouslings of steamed greens and rich, hearty vegetable soups. I don’t eat breads or pastas any more, and my whole grain consumption is minimal these days. So, hearty soups, salads and greens are my main staple and to that we’ll add the occasional lentil stew, bean burritos, etc.
Any vices?
I stay up too late, so I’m chronically sleep deprived. I’ve got so much work to do. My day is full of office patients and clinic inpatients. I have emails down my arm waiting for me. I’ve got phone consults, articles to write and books to review. If I ever catch the guy who only put 24 hours in a day I’m going to give him a piece of my mind because I have so much to do and too little time to do it. So, I’m always behind on sleep — which is not a good thing since it ages you — and that is definitely not a good thing.

What do you for recreation?
I’ve got my 21-speed road bike and, as soon as we’re through with this interview, I’m on my bike riding through the vineyards.

Are you still a pilot?
I’m a passionate pilot. I get in a plane every chance I get, but it’s an expensive sport and so I don’t fly very much. I’d fly every day, if I could.

Are there other Klapers or are you a bachelor?
I’m still a bachelor although I just entered a relationship with a lovely, wonderful vegan woman. That makes me a VERY happy fellow these days. I’m not married, and I have no children that I’m aware of!

From the many videos of you I have watched, and when I remember you speaking at NHA conferences in the past, you seem to have a great sense of humor. Where does that all come from?
From my dad (who had a wonderful, understated sense of humor) and my life. There comes a point when you see that there is great humor all around you — especially if you don’t take yourself so seriously. I have made so many mistakes in my life that I’m a very humble guy who is aware of my ignorance and fallibility. That gives me great compassion for everyone else who are caught in the same web of time that I am and who are also trying to do the best that they can. There’s so much humor in the human condition that it’s easy to laugh at.

When you became the vegan doc back in the 1980s, you were kind of a lonesome cowboy. There certainly weren’t many medical doctors on the progressive health scene. Now you have a lot of peers don’t you?
Yes, thank heavens. The cavalry has arrived! This younger generation of doctors is wonderful to see and they give me hope.

Are you optimistic for the future?
I do have some optimism, but I’m actually very concerned about the future. I have two nieces who have little children and I look at these two-, three- and four-year old kids and I have grave concerns about their future.

The humans on this planet have to shift to a plant-based diet or catastrophe will befall us in the very near future. But if we can get this message out, if we can help people make the transition to a plant-based diet, everything will be okay. The people and the planet will heal.

It is said, “If you don’t change where you are headed you’re going to wind up where you’re going.” We have to change where we are headed NOW. So I’m optimistic about the effort we are going to make — but the ultimate outcome remains to be seen.

I don’t expect the world to become vegan, but if everyone got their meat eating down to a piece of pot roast on Wednesday and Sunday, I’d take that. If the other 19 or 20 meals in their week were purely plant-based — and eventually if the meat eaten on those non-vegan days was, “in vitro” factory-produced — we would ALL win the game. So if we could just get to that “almost-completely vegan” point I would be very, very happy!

Great catching up with you doc!
Thanks for the opportunity to share my thoughts with the members of the NHA!