

ATKINS FOOD FIGHT

Diet doc's empire at steak

EXCLUSIVE

By ANNE BECKER

Forget about the bread - the hottest Atkins diet issue in New York at the moment is a fight over the dough.

Associates of diet guru Dr. Robert Atkins; who died in April after slipping on ice, are now beefing about who should get the biggest share of the thriving and lucrative patient base he left behind.

In compliance with state law regarding deceased doctors, the Atkins Center for Complementary Medicine closed its doors on Oct. 15, leaving thousands of patients looking for diet guidance elsewhere.

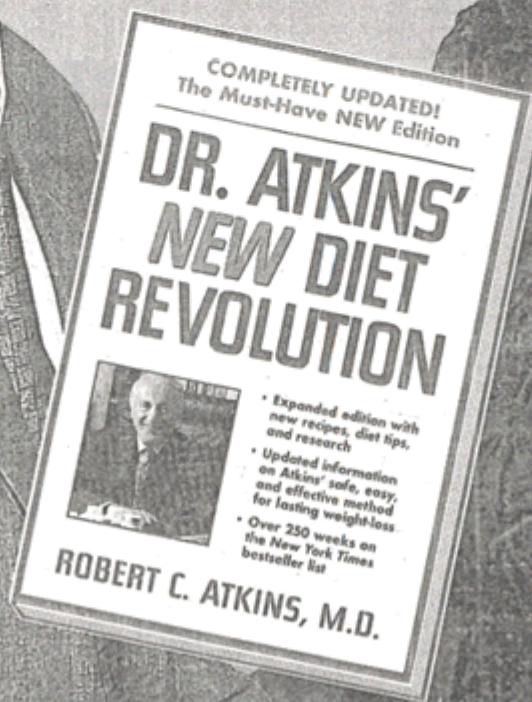
Dr. Keith Berkowitz, a 34-year-old internist who had worked full-time at the center for two months, was the first to rush to Atkins' aid when he fell and was widely quoted in the media after the tragedy.

He says Atkins hired him as the center's business director with the intention of passing him the torch after he retired.

Berkowitz speculates he is getting more attention because he was at the center when Atkins fell and his voice was on the centers answering machine in the days before it closed.

Low-carb legacy

Dr. Keith Berkowitz (left) has angered some of his fellow former Atkins Center employees by opening a new practice catering to the center's former clients. Atkins' widow, Veronica (right), has said she would like to see her late husband's work carried on by his team of experts.



"I've never outright claimed to be his successor," said Berkowitz, who said he was seeing up to 15 patients a day when the Atkins Center closed.

"I was the last one there. People were very anxious. They were looking to find where their care would be continued."

Berkowitz confirmed he had recently expressed a desire to buy the Atkins practice and gain access to its patient list under the condition that he forfeit use of the Atkins name.

But the sale was nixed by executives from Atkins Nutritionals Inc., a company that has marketing rights to the Atkins brand name and has endorsed more than 100 low-carb products.

Board members included Atkins' widow, Veronica,

who was bequeathed most of her husband's \$10 million estate and is chairman of the charity foundation established in his name. When the company announced the center would close, Veronica Atkins issued a statement expressing a wish that her husband's work be carried on by the "amazing team" of experts who had worked alongside him.

Soon after that announcement, investment firms Parthenon Capital and Goldman Sachs Capital Partners bought a controlling stake in the 15-year-old company, which netted \$100 million in sales last year and is expected to double its returns this year.

Veronica Atkins welcomed the investment and said it was in keeping with her husband's long range plans.

Patients of the Atkins Center have since received a letter informing them they should transfer their medical records.

The letter listed six doctors who follow the "Atkins nutritional approach." Because the list was alphabetical, Berkowitz was named first.

Atkins Nutritionals Inc. says it has nothing to do with any squabbles over acquiring former Atkins Center patients.

But spokesman Richard Rothstein warned against anyone trying to take advantage of the Atkins brand without permission.

"No one outside of Atkins Nutritionals Inc. has the right to claim to be Dr. Atkins' successor," he said.

This article an excerpt of the original New York Post story.