

### Mangia meno (eat less)



Last May in New York workers had to remove a window and several rows of bricks from the side of the house of a man weighing 850 to 1000 lb to take him to the hospital. The official record, however, according to the *Guinness Books of Records*, is held by a Mississippi man at 891 lb. But the judges may have been unaware of the claims of a Michigan woman who in 1993 was said to have reached 1189 lb. She had lost her bowel and bladder function, depended totally for care on nurses and family, and required 15 firemen to carry her wrapped in a tarpaulin to the local hospital.

Such gross obesity remains the butt of jokes and object of discrimination. Fat people remain "the last persons you can safely kick about"; the "last safe prejudice," even though in the early 1990s a government agency declared obesity a protected category under the Federal Disabilities Act. But attitudes remain deeply ingrained. Last May when a 500 lb Chicago woman died suddenly while taking a shower, police allegedly dragged her body by the feet and left it exposed, even jokingly telling the neighborhood urchins that they could take a peep for \$5, leading to an official investigation for misconduct and a demonstration by 40 indignant neighbors carrying placards against the police.

Meanwhile surveys have repeatedly found a substantial increase in obesity among Americans in the past decade, with severe health consequences—heart disease, arthritis, accidents, gall stones, premature death—as well as social disabilities. Obese women, for example, earn less money, receive less education, and are less likely to marry. Many overweight people are perpetually on a diet, some are for ever weight cycling, but for most of them dieting does not seem to work. There are almost as many diet books as there are fat people; diet doctors abound, as do diet clubs; and there are desperate methods such as jaw wiring, stomach stapling, and intestinal bypass.

Diet pills, mostly sympathomimetic agents, are also making a comeback. Most popular is the fenfluramine-phentermine combination ("fen-phen")—the stimulating pill for the morning, the sedating one for at night. Then there is newly approved dexfenfluramine, said to be effective but causing pulmonary hypertension in rare cases. In the pipeline are drugs that boost serotonin levels, prevent fat absorption or cause it to be burnt, block brain receptors, or inform the brain that it has had enough food.

Yet although not a month passes without some new article on why people become obese or cannot lose weight, the simplest approach must surely remain the one recommended by the clerk at the airport in Caliarì, Sardinia, a few decades ago. Seeing a black shawled woman step on the scales at the check in counter and give a mournful look, he handed her the boarding pass with a flourish and said: "Mangia meno."