

The Complexity of Obesity Part 2 of 4

June 2006

☀ A World Divided by Diet

An astronaut surveying planet Earth from afar would see a strange sight. A growing portion of the world's population (5%) killing itself from eating too much; another part (13%) dying from not having eaten enough, according to global estimates provided by the FAO. An 852 million undernourished people in 2002 is contrasted with 2006 figures of 300 million obese adults, 115 million of which suffer from obesity-related conditions. Other epidemiological sources cite 27 million obese children, 10 million of which at risk of developing obesity-related conditions. Overweight global estimates are 913 million adults (age 20+) representing 20% of the world adult population; 195 million children, equal to 10% of children worldwide.

☀ Pandemic Proportions

No country is immune to the progressive and debilitating effects of overweight and obesity related conditions. The US-based Institute of Medicine, in collaboration with the National Institute of Public Health in Mexico, convened a two-day workshop last month to explore potential collaboration in the area of preventing childhood obesity in populations of Mexican origin. In China, 23% of the adult population is overweight or obese, and diet-related chronic diseases have become the leading cause of death. A study conducted by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi, India, reveals that in urban centres - especially in north India - over 50% of women and 40% of men aged 35+ are overweight.

☀ Cause and Effect Debates

Stakeholders from several sectors of society would like to reverse the trend, primarily motivated by the high healthcare costs and shortened lifespan associated with expanding girth. Effective solutions require identification of cause, and for every finger pointed in one direction – at media advertising, the food industry, today's parents, school cafeterias, video games – there is a thumb pointing in another.

☀ Seemingly Insurmountable

In 2003, the IFIC Foundation investigated the behaviour and attitudes of overweight American parents. These people know what they need to do – eat less and more nutritiously – the barrier is how to do it amidst obligations to their children, their jobs, and other aspects of their own lives. They lack the 'bandwidth' – time or inclination – to make it happen right now. Yet, they also defended themselves, proclaiming that 'near perfect health reflects an imbalance of the other extreme and is not indicative of the average person'. They certainly have a point, echoing the words of the American journalist George Dennison Prentice (1802-1870) "*What some call health, if purchased by perpetual anxiety about diet, isn't much better than tedious disease*".

☀ Making Big, Small

The UK government appears to have implemented the IFIC study with their recent "*Small change, big difference*" campaign, designed to encourage Britons to make minor changes to their lifestyles, quoting "There is now clear evidence that people should not be put off making a change, just because they don't see how they could manage the full five-a-day, or 30 minutes of daily exercise. Research has proven that just one extra serving of fruits or vegetables, and moderate amounts of activity, can contribute to a longer and healthier life."

☀ Some Web sites

<http://www.ific.org/research/obesityres.cfm>

<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/OrganisationPolicy/Modernisation/ChoosingHealth/SmallChangeBigDifference/fs/en>

<http://www.worldhungeryear.org/> WHY (World Hunger Year)

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