

Obesity & Life Expectancy Part 4 of 4

December 2006

☀ A Wake-up Call

A *New England Journal of Medicine* article predicted an end to the steady rise in US life expectancy, due particularly to childhood obesity.¹ In a follow up commentary, the authors sound an alarming wake-up call, drawing a comparison to the smoking habit. They suggest that if the US had changed, within two decades, from a nation of mostly non-smokers, to one in which smoking among children had grown from negligible levels to 20-30%, people would and could readily understand that “the short term effects would be minimal; the long term effects would be devastating.” The most detrimental effects of childhood obesity are yet to be realized.

☀ The Prognosis

The first and measurable phase is here today – the growing prevalence of obesity among young children. The second phase is emerging, observed as obesity-induced health conditions rarely or never before seen in young people, such as Type II diabetes in children. The third phase will be obesity-induced mortality over the next 50 years, as these children reach the third to sixth decades of life, the age at which obesity begins to kill.

☀ It's Not in the Genes!

Environmental factors such as lifestyle, culture and corporate behaviour are meeting with increasing scrutiny. The American gene pool has not dramatically changed during the past 30 years, but obesity prevalence in the US has tripled. Americans, like Canadians, are not a society that feeds itself. For example, only 2% of the Canadian population classify themselves as farmers, while 100% of the Canadian population eats food. Modern society is dependent on the food industry to feed us. Food manufacturers interested in long-standing sustainability and profits, may wish to motto the slogan ‘*put the food back into snack food*’ and make it a long-term corporate goal.

¹New Eng. J. Med. 352: 1103-1110

☀ Consumers Select and Reject

The monkey wrench in many a marketing plan is often the consumer, especially as regards ‘better for you’ nutritious platforms and propositions. 87% of consumers reportedly believe that a healthy diet is a better way to manage illness than is medication, yet their shopping habits are predominantly influenced by convenience and cost. In-store surveys show that many shoppers set out to buy healthier food, yet munch on nutrient-empty snacks while pushing a grocery cart containing nutritious choices. Insight and reason into such contradictory human behaviour may have been provided by the French philosopher Voltaire (and the French would know these things): “Nothing would be more tiresome than eating and drinking if God had not made them a pleasure as well as a necessity.”

☀ To See & Be Seen

Several jurisdictions in Canada have expelled junk food from public school properties, prompting calls in other countries for similar government intervention. Certainly a starting point, the result of this noble effort is not yet clear. Success will require tangible support from sectors of society other than the educational system. Drive-thru queues lasso the QSR's (Quick Service Restaurants) of North America, many drivers smoking a banned-from-indoors cigarette, as exhaust fumes cloud the parking lots. While these same restaurateurs openly promote healthy menu selections, and offer complete nutrition information, nutritious choices are not the drivers of sales and profits, nor the bumper-to-bumper, environment-polluting, drive-thrus.

☀ Some Web sites

http://www.ift.org/news_bin/news/newsFrames.php

<http://www.caloriecontrol.org/>

© 2007 International Food Focus Ltd., 211 Carlton Street, East Office, Toronto, ON M5A 2K9 T: 416-924-3266
F: 416-924-2726 E: foodfocus@foodfocus.on.ca

Food Fax is archived @ our Web site <http://www.foodfocus.on.ca>