

A CLASH OF INTERESTS

Thirty-six percent of American children who were born in the year 2000 will develop Type 2 diabetes according to a new study by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. For Hispanics and blacks the predicted incidence of diabetes is at or near fifty percent. Given the rapid increase in obesity rates among the adult and teen-age population in the United States today, the CDC study estimated that in excess of fifty million Americans will be diabetics by the year 2050. Today, all types of diabetes affect approximately 17 million Americans.

The reason: To a large degree, lifestyle. The combination of a reasonable diet, weight loss and regular exercise does help to prevent much of the disease, especially Type 2 diabetes. But here is where interests clash.

The fast food industry, like Lorelei on the rock above the Rhine River, lures adults and children unable to resist its temptations of toys and the opportunity to “super-size for 39 cents” to its premises. The frozen food aisles of our supermarkets are filled with heat-and-eat products laden with calories of fat and sugar. Schools, in order to supplement income, have permitted vending machines to be installed to allow students to purchase “junk food” in addition to the pizza and corn dogs obtained in the school lunch line. Our children are at an ever-increasing risk: Type 2 diabetes, once known as Adult Onset Diabetes, is now found in much younger individuals than ever before.

Big-and-Tall men's stores are doing well, and double-digit ladies' dresses sell out.

The television and entertainment industry has convinced the populace that one cannot watch a movie, via DVD or videocassette at home on the couch, or in a theater, without 32 fluid ounces of a soft drink and a gallon bucket of popcorn laced with butter.

Exercise is what one sees on television, either in the form of some lithe young ladies contorting to rhythmic tunes, or by watching the various types of sports. It is definitely something other people do. Lonesome treadmills and exercise bicycles languish in bed and exercise rooms in our homes, waiting for the use that seldom comes.

Against that backdrop, medicine is fighting its battle to keep the population in reasonable health. Preventive medicine is seldom practiced because most “healthcare” plans pay only for illness care on an episodal basis.

According to a 2003 report by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 44.3 million Americans were obese at the end of 2001. Researchers estimate that another 5 million Americans are undiagnosed diabetics. The rate of obesity in children between the ages of 6 and 11 has tripled since 1960 to an alarming 13 percent in 2001.

The social and healthcare costs of the epidemics of obesity and diabetes are staggering. It is estimated that the lifetime cost of care for a diabetic is approximately four times that of a non-diabetic individual. The annual direct cost of care for diabetics in the United States today lies near 45 billion Dollars. Added to the costs associated with smokers' illnesses, AIDS and the

chronic and acute illnesses of increasing longevity, it is quite clear that unless significant lifestyle changes occur very soon to forestall the spread of these problems, our nation will not be able to afford to provide minimally appropriate care except for those who have the means to purchase it.

In his thoughtful Letter to the Editor of ROUND-UP (June 2003), Dr. DeMoss eloquently describes the dire and constant need for diabetes and obesity education and counseling. Nothing short of a long-term, national campaign against obesity and its attendant health risks will have much impact on lifestyles. The success of the anti-smoking drive is indeed encouraging. Similar results should be obtainable with the problem of obesity and diabetes if we are willing to confront our patients consistently and with vigor with respect to these health risks.

There are some encouraging signs on the horizon. The New York Times reported recently that the Ford Motor Company, Honeywell, General Mills, PepsiCo and some other large employers have announced that they will begin a campaign amongst their over-weight employees to lose weight to improve their personal health. The Ford Company's director of healthcare management indicated that "amazingly large portions" of Ford's 3 billion-Dollar expenditure on healthcare were spent on illnesses due to obesity. Emphasizing the magnitude of the problem, the Washington Business Group of Health organized the Institute of Health Effects of Obesity. The Ford Motor Company is a founding board member of the Institute. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as the Institute of Medicine have joined the board and will provide research financed by their organizations.

I have discussed here only the impact on our own society. To be sure, other nations, many of them emerging nations, are experiencing the very same problems, especially as these nations become more affluent. Indeed, the health of the entire world's population is at risk, and the associated global costs are nearly beyond comprehension.

As always, I value your comments and opinions!

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