

Finding Solutions to the Obesity Problem

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – May 13, 2012

We've heard much ado this week about new research from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) concerning obesity in America. Both reports were featured Monday and Tuesday at the CDC-sponsored "Weight of a Nation" summit.

The media led with "shock and awe" – namely IOM's finding that 2/3rds of American adults are either overweight or obese and a CDC prediction that 42% of Americans will be obese by 2030. Attention to those figures is good. But, reporters are not sharing the full context, nor are they elaborating enough on recommendations. The summit was not just to lament how bad things are; it was a multi-disciplined gathering to map out what to do about it.

Titled "Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention: Solving the Weight of the Nation," the IOM report is a serious, but hopeful prescription for cure. The authors acknowledge what's already working, but assert that current trends can only be altered by combining proven methods into a holistic program.

"The committee's overall charge was to develop a set of recommendations for accelerating progress toward obesity prevention over the next decade, as well as to recommend potential measures of progress toward this goal" they write. "Inherent in this charge was recognition that, while a large number of promising individual programs and interventions currently are being supported, implemented, and evaluated, there is a growing need to identify a set of obesity prevention actions that, both individually and together, can accelerate meaningful change on a societal level."

The report details recommendations and strategies around five major goals: (1) Make Physical activity an integral and routine part of life; (2) Create food and beverage environments that ensure healthy food and beverage options are the routine, easy choice; (3) Transform messages about physical activity and nutrition; (4) Expand the role of health care providers, insurers, and employers in obesity prevention; (5) Make schools a national focal point for obesity prevention.

Maybe you think these points are obvious. But, if it's so simple, why are we moving so rapidly in the wrong direction?

The broad assessment and sweeping recommendations from this week's summit drew fire from some, who criticized the "nanny state" mentality of a community-based prevention program. Their knee-jerk reaction is still to see the presence of obesity as an absence of individual initiative.

Dr. Richard Jackson, MD, pediatrician and former CDC Center Director, spent 30 years researching epidemics. As coauthor and narrator of the "Designing Healthy Communities" series on PBS, he has a counter to that view.

"We call it a common-source epidemic," Jackson says. "When everyone begins to develop the same set of symptoms, it's not something in their minds; it's something in their environment that is changing their health." That something, he says, is our "built environment." Building cities to accommodate cars, not people, we create places inherently unhealthy for humans, because they inhibit walking and biking, pollute the air, make good food harder to access, and discourage social interaction. The IOM report makes similar points around how an environment either promotes or discourages physical activity.

Ironically, May 9 was National Bike to School day, an effort to promote healthy, active transportation. Unfortunately, biking to school – though routine when most of us grew up – is today considered too dangerous to allow. Bicycling Magazine published a feature story this month titled “Why Johnny Can’t Ride,” reporting on a growing national trend to prohibit bicycling to school. Students are sent home, and parents have been threatened with legal action for persisting in letting their kids bike. The Newton County School System has no such policy. But, considering school placement on busy roads, with high-speed traffic, few sidewalks, and no bike lanes, biking is impractical. Buses run everywhere, as cars line up every morning and afternoon.

So the cycle begins. Children transported for 12 years by car or bus don’t suddenly start walking and biking as adults. In a state where 150 pedestrians and 20 cyclists are killed annually on roadways, Georgians have every reason to fear hitting the streets outside an automobile. Yet, not doing so is slowly but surely killing thousands more.

Environment contributes, positively or negatively, in every dimension: physical activity, nutrition, messaging, healthcare, and schools. It will take more than a “nanny state” to fix the mess we’re in. This is not about government; it’s about the entire community. Newton needs leaders to step up now from every corner: public health, government, medicine, business, schools, churches, and the general public.

I’m in. Are you?

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