



A response to the obesity epidemic

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By the time a topic becomes so mainstream as to be a standing joke on late night talk shows, we need to admit it is serious. Consider Jay Leno's standing gag that starts with "we are getting so fat that..." and you understand what research and surveys have been telling us for years: we are becoming more obese and it is affecting our quality of life and lifespan.

Obesity is a major healthcare issue in Canada — an estimated quarter of children and more than half of adults in Canada are overweight or obese. Despite efforts by governments, obesity rates continue to increase.

It is the health implications of obesity that concern most: Overweight people are at increased risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, kidney disease, liver disease, blindness, arthritis, amputations and certain cancers.

Who is responsible for changing this? How should we proceed. One response comes from a survey done by IPSOS Descarie in April 2010 which found "massive support by Canadians for government intervention in the fight against the obesity epidemic." Some 86% of respondents agreed with the statement: "the government should take measures to incite individuals to adopt healthy lifestyles."

The same survey showed that three-quarters of us are aware of the contribution that marketing unhealthy food products to children contributes to overweight and obesity issues among young Canadians. And 82% of respondents would like limits to be placed on the marketing of low nutritional value foods to children. Almost two-thirds favoured prohibition of advertising directed at children (already the case in Quebec).

"Government should do it." Interesting response, but only one part of a good strategy on reducing obesity. But obesity cannot be solved by government alone, but government does have a leadership role. The Provincial Health Services Authority recently released a new strategy to improve the situation. It focuses on using a comprehensive approach to achieve its goals.

The Obesity Reduction Initiative includes treatment, food, physical activity and monitoring as elements in its comprehensive and consultative approach. It highlights five focuses.

First is using a coordinated approach and engaging and consulting with all sides of society, from health-care providers and charitable organizations to the private sector and individuals. Next is an effort to change the environment of obesity. That means discouraging and reducing unhealthy eating to more closely reflect

Canada's Food Guide. It also means increasing the supply of nutritious foods. Encouraging physical activity is a third key. Making recreation both accessible and affordable can go a long

way to reducing obesity. Fourth comes specific efforts to expand health services to support those who are overweight. Finally, there is monitoring and tracking improvements to identify what works and where improvements are needed.

This is an excellent plan which will make a difference in people's lives. Of course, while it is helpful for governments to educate, legislate and promote healthy living and healthy weights, there is also the need to take personal responsibility for our weight and our lives.

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