

Obesity and the Government's Responsibility for Diet

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We learn from evolutionary studies that survival belongs neither to the strongest nor to the most intelligent but to those most responsive to change. In a very short space of time, we have created an alien environment for a free-thinking, free-moving caveman. We neither eat, move nor copulate when we want to. Our entire lives are regulated to meet the system requirements of the evolving supraorganism: humanity, bound together by microelectronics where the insect societies used pheromones. In social evolution, individuals relinquish their freedoms in return for an increased security of tenure on life. This is the unwritten contract between population and Government: compliance in return for protection. The first responsibility of Government is to protect the people.

It is generally agreed, amongst the spokespersons for the diet and health community, that one quarter of the risk of developing cancer and one third of the risk of developing cardiovascular disease is related to the eating of a diet that is inappropriate to the needs of the individual, in terms of genotype and sex, age, activity levels, occupation, lifestyle and

cultural behaviour. These illnesses account for some 60,000 deaths a year among the under-sixty-fives and many are preventable. In addition, the micronutrient status of children and young adults is highly variable and suspect: females are disadvantaged with respect to males, and intake levels of vitamins A, B₂ and D, folate, calcium, iron, magnesium, potassium and zinc all require careful investigation.

Obesity, the consequence of too much energy being consumed with respect to energy usage, is the highly visible sign of a much greater and more destabilising malaise: the social construction of a world that uncouples the ancestral equilibrium between diet, activity and health. Frequent movement is not just a means for energy dispersal, it is the default state for an optimised human machine: from the squeezing of veins to assist blood return to the heart to the alternating ballet of the six eye muscles that seizes when the eye is stationary.

Over the period, 1980-1998, only Samoa and Kuwait had higher annual increases in the prevalence of obesity than the United Kingdom. Socially

disadvantaged women are twice as likely to become obese as their wealthier neighbours. With the accompanying increase in the early onset of Type II diabetes, the need for action has now become critical.

The requirement of Government is leadership. A UK-wide national policy on diet, activity and health should be established immediately, building on the examples set by the Welsh Assembly Government and the Food Standards Agency in Wales, and the Scottish Diet Action Plan. The Welsh Strategy, initiated in Food and Wellbeing and launched with all-party political support in February 2003, has made tremendous strides in its first year of operation. The key to its success is the will and the means to co-ordinate a total social response to what is a socially generated threat.

A co-ordinating centre should be established in the Cabinet Office or close to it, in terms of cross-cutting authority, and an individual should be charged with its championship. A whole-school food and activity policy should be established in every school and educational institute in the United Kingdom. The British Nutrition Foundation has

constructed a guide on this subject in conjunction with the Department for Education and Skills. The whole population should be educated in the relationship between diet, activity and health. This would involve public service broadcasting and a creative use of all the many disparate activities that are already under way. We can make much better use of the charities and programmes that are already battling in this arena. Above all, Government must identify and reward best practice and successful change.

With regard to industry, Government must encourage adaptation. Every business should have in place a whole-company food and activity policy that influences office design, working practices and meal provision. In such an environment, it should become unfashionable to use a mechanical lift to transport one's own body. Electronic labelling will be needed to support the limited nutritional information that can be placed on-pack. With a code that can be read in-store or at home, the necessary information can be delivered comprehensively in a language of choice, at a pre-selected level of educational experience, in a font that can be read by the elderly and customised for consumers with allergen concerns or specific medical requirements.

Since individuals tend to buy the same basic collection of goods each week, gathering the necessary information on the products would not be as arduous as it may seem at first sight. Food manufacturers need to ensure that the recommended portion sizes of high-energy foods can be easily fitted into a balanced diet. The Food Standards Agency has already

indicated that products containing more than 20% all fats, 5% saturates, 10% added sugar or 0.5% sodium, by weight, should be eaten sparingly compared with other components of the diet. In addition, there is a great deal of potential for the development of novel foods and ingredients, such as resistant starches, that could reduce calorific intake from staple foods.

Only when citizens are fully educated by Government and adequately informed by industry can they be empowered to take responsibility for their own health and wellbeing. Government must also encourage and facilitate the leading of a healthy lifestyle. Individuals should eat five portions of plant material per day (especially stem, leaf and fruit) within a balanced and varied, lower-sodium, higher-unsaturated-fatty-acid diet.

Food, by definition, contains the nutrients necessary for growth and the maintenance of life. Whereas all foods are health-promoting, unless contaminated, all diets are not. The debate on healthy food should rotate around the ease with which a recommended serving can be fitted into a balanced diet. Even oxygen is poisonous to humans in high concentrations. Individuals should create opportunistic activity and balance energy input with energy output. In a young woman, 14 g of fat and 274 g of carrot will each generate 100 kcal of energy that will require 13 min of mountain biking or 91 min of sleeping to discharge.

Alcohol should be drunk in moderation; it is, after all, a substance produced by yeasts to reduce the biological competition. The huge absorbent area of the lungs

makes the breathing of clean air, not just the avoidance of smoking, imperative for sustained health.

One problem with medicine is that it serves the individual and not necessarily the state: a paradox in protection. Sustaining and replicating genomes, irrespective of their biological suitability for independent survival, accumulates a debt to Natural Selection which used to be paid in infant mortality and now is paid in increasing healthcare costs. The sessile white rat population that we have subsequently established in the wealthier economies of the world may ultimately need a very different diet to sustain it compared with one recreated with an active ancestral caveman in mind.

In the case of obesity, prevention is far, far better than any attempt to cure. The economic and social costs of ignoring the impact of poor diet and inadequate activity on health is incalculable. Have we still not learnt the lesson that any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind or are we doomed to remain a herding animal that simply aspires to become social? The charge of nannyism is often levelled at Government in a cowardly fashion because it is always easier to do nothing than to make a stand. The extent to which the strong protect the weak is the measure of a true society. Understanding is strength and the well-informed should defend the ignorant. Who better than a nanny to stand between the weak and the world? A Government that abdicates its responsibility for education forfeits its right to rule. What passes for nannyism is simple humanity: but this is only the beginning.