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**Abstract:** One of the many obesity-related questions which remains unanswered is, perhaps, the biggest question of all: what do we do about it? The reason that this is a difficult question is not just that anti-obesity programmes tend not to work, it is also because all social policies designed to affect lots of people inevitably have unintended consequences. In other words, the good intentions of those who want to fight a ‘war on obesity’ may often be cold comfort for people, especially children, who are the target of intervention. The devil, as ever, will be in the detail. So, as the ‘war on obesity’ gathers momentum, it behoves at least some of us to ask how children are being affected by this new war and how are they likely to be affected in the future. This article is an early dispatch from the war on obesity’s emerging front lines/
Is the war on obesity also a war on children?

Michael Gard

Prologue

In the winter of 2007, the Howard government in Australia decided to intervene boldly in the lives of the Northern Territory’s Aboriginal people. Their timing was perfect. Only days before, the Aboriginal activist Noel Pearson had successfully negotiated a new government backed welfare scheme for four remote Aboriginal communities in the Cape York region of north Queensland, including his own home town of Hope Vale. Under the scheme, welfare payments to parents found to be neglecting their children’s health, nutrition and education would be diverted to trust funds managed by community elders. The announcement unleashed a storm of controversy. Pearson answered his critics by claiming that the rights of children to grow up in safe and healthy environments trumped other considerations such as the human and legal rights of parents. Pearson argued that accusations of discrimination were an insult to the children of Cape York who suffered daily discrimination because of the abuse and neglect many were forced to endure.

In the course of the interviews he gave at this time, Pearson was asked to comment on a recently released report on the horrific and wide spread sexual abuse of Aboriginal children in Australia’s Northern Territory. The Territory’s government had been in possession of the report for a month before it was released and announced that it would respond within eight weeks. Amongst other things, the report called for better education of Aboriginal people. Pearson saw the report’s recommendations as utterly inadequate. Sexual abuse, alcoholism and domestic violence were, he said, moral not educational problems; troubled Aboriginal communities needed to re-establish the moral norms that existed prior to the disastrous and corrosive effects of ‘passive welfare’.

Public support for Pearson’s views appeared to be high. His condemnation of ‘passive welfare’ also matched the general policy direction of the conservative federal government. Emboldened by the apparent inertia of the Northern Territory authorities, the Prime Minister pounced, announcing that his government would take control of remote Northern Territory communities, ban alcohol and pornography, suspend Aboriginal land ownership rights, and send teams of doctors and police into every community. Like Pearson, the Prime Minister’s rhetoric emphasised that the seriousness of the situation overrode other considerations. At the time of writing this article, opinion polls suggested public support for the government’s actions was running at about 60%.

The scourge of obesity

Obesity is said to be ‘modernity’s scourge’. At a recent international conference held in Sydney, the biggest names in obesity research chose to describe the problem in apocalyptic terms; the obesity epidemic was ‘engulfing the entire world’, ‘as big a threat as global warming and bird flu’, set to ‘overwhelm every medical system in the world’ and cause a generation of children to ‘die before their parents’ (CBS News, 2007, http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/09/03/health/main1962961.shtml).
A problem of this kind demands drastic action and there is no shortage of voices offering opinions and advice. They include:

- the Governor General of Australia, Major Michael Jeffries, blaming children’s ‘fat lifestyle’ and calling for them to be ‘prised from their DVDs and Playstations and encouraged to play sport’;
- Yale University’s Kelly Brownell’s call for a tax on ‘junk food’;
- England’s Labour Government’s plan to fight obesity by re-invigorating school sport;
- exposés about the practices of multinational food corporations, most notably Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* and Marion Nestle’s *Food Politics* in which she argues that ‘Big Food’ actively undermines public health messages about healthy eating;
- English conservative Lord Tebbit’s charge that gay marriage is the cause of rising obesity;
- Greg Critser, author of *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World*, arguing that the baby boomer generation is not only greedy and weak willed but also incapable of instilling dietary or, for that matter, moral restraint in children;
- Mary Eberstadt of the U.S. based Hoover Institution denouncing feminists and working mothers for neglecting children and their wifely household duties;
- Australia’s own Angela Shanahan whose regular newspaper columns attribute all society’s ills to the decline of family values, regular church going and, in the case of obesity, family meal times;
- scientists who insist that obesity is, as much as anything, a matter of genetic inheritance.

To make matters worse (or better, depending on your point of view), a number of sceptics have even argued that the ‘obesity epidemic’ has been oversold and may not be the crisis it is assumed to be (for example, Campos, 2004). For example, my own research with Jan Wright (Gard & Wright, 2005) has cast doubt on the economic costs of rising obesity, the significance of ‘sedentary’ leisure like TVs and computers, and claims that population levels of physical activity are declining. Instead, we have suggested that the science of obesity is dogged by uncertainty and contradiction and that obesity research has produced no ‘smoking gun’.

Although much of our work has proved controversial, there is actually widespread agreement on the point about uncertainty, a point which has made decisive policy action virtually impossible. Some commentators have responded by calling for governments and health authorities to stop waiting for conclusive evidence and to act on the ‘best available’ evidence (Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, 2005). Elsewhere, fast-food companies have exploited the situation by pointing – legitimately - to the lack of conclusive evidence linking their products with population obesity (for example, see Cummins & Macintyre, 2006).

In this context it is hard not to feel sympathy for policy makers faced with calls for differing kinds of action from a huge and diverse range of interest groups. In fact, if you factor in the emerging epidemiological consensus that the ‘built environment’
should be the focus of obesity policy (Frank, Engelke & Schmid, 2003; Richardson, 2004) then it is difficult to know where anti-obesity policy should start. After all, proponents of the ‘built environment’ thesis argue that we need to radically change virtually every aspect of our day-to-day lives in order to build physical activity into our routines. This means changing building codes, approaches to town planning, street design and has implications for policy areas as diverse as law and order, education and transport.

New Zealand’s Health Minister, Pete Hodgson, has responded in probably the only way he could, by avoiding blaming any groups in particular and charging ‘society’ as a whole with the responsibility for change. In a recent press release he was quoted saying: ‘The answers will come from individuals, families, communities, schools, businesses and local and central agencies working together.’

While this is an understandable and politically astute response, my argument in the remainder of this paper will be that the ‘a little bit of everything’ approach to obesity policy is neither wise nor likely. Instead, I will argue that current obesity policies tend to punitively focus on children, not because there are good scientific reasons to do so, but because it is politically expedient. Trying to change the behaviour of children makes sense only once we have given up thinking seriously about obesity. More than this, focusing on children proves that, in reality, policy makers are not particularly concerned about obesity and, perhaps prudently, are more mindful of the appearance of action than action itself. After all, as the example with which I began this chapter shows, if a problem is considered serious enough, governments will act and people will support them even when these actions contravene widely held principles, existing laws and, significantly, curtail the rights of business to sell what they want to whom ever they want.

The undeclared war on children

In a field of study like obesity it is dangerous to talk about ‘consensus’ and I have used it once already in this article. Nonetheless, I am going to (perhaps controversially) suggest that a consensus concerning children’s physical activity levels is beginning to take shape. While the ‘couch potato’ child has been a conceptual staple of recent media reporting and scholarly research into childhood obesity, finding him/her has not been so straightforward. A growing number of studies have failed to confirm the idea of a ‘couch potato generation’, prompting a leading Australian researcher to recant his previous statements and declare declining childhood physical activity an ‘urban myth’ (Robotham & Lee, 2006).

This is certainly not to suggest that access to safe, affordable and rewarding physical activity is easy for all children and their carers. There is reasonable evidence that physical activity is in many respects just like other consumer goods; some can afford lots of it, some cannot (Banwell, Shipley & Strazdins, 2007). The reasons for this are complex but what it means is that when researchers look for evidence that today’s children are, as a group, lazy, inactive and physically unskilled they do not find it.

I think this is an important point because of the way commentators, both in the media and the scientific literature, have gone out of their way to paint a decidedly
unflattering picture of modern children. My question here is a simple one: has all this
demonising been wise or even empirically justifiable?

Against the pervasive idea of an indolent ‘couch potato generation’ of children I
want to juxtapose the behaviour of a particular group of adults. Over the last thirty
years the production and sale of what we often call ‘junk food’ has been fostered by
the work of marketing and consumer behaviour gurus. Most of us are familiar with
idea of ‘pester power’ and the way junk food advertising has been crafted to increase
sales by provoking conflict between children and parents. My sense is that we tend to
see junk food advertising as one of the necessary evils of modern life, somewhat akin
to traffic accidents and spam emails. Perhaps it is because of its ubiquity and
outwardly friendly face that we do not pay this form of advertising more critical
attention.

Whatever the case, the field of consumer psychology is a fascinating place to visit.
For example, the pioneering work of James U. McNeal – author of Kids as
Customers: A Handbook of Marketing to Children (1992) – draws on research into
childhood psychology and play to develop precise strategies intended to shape
children’s desires and tastes. His more recent work, On Becoming a Consumer:
Development of Consumer Behaviour Patterns in Childhood (2007), attempts to
harmonise – almost to the point of blurring the distinction between - theories of
childhood development and consumer behaviour. McNeil’s work has spawned a
thriving literature, including the likes of Dan S. Acuff and Robert H. Reiher’s (1997)
What Kids Buy and Why: The Psychology of Marketing to Kids. As well as boasting
about marketing strategies that exploit research findings into the dreams, fantasies and
aspirations of children, the publicity blurb for What Kids Buy and Why reads:

How can you create outstanding products and programs that will win
in the marketplace and in the hearts of kids and parents? Dan S. Acuff
and Robert H. Reiher have invented a development and marketing
process called Youth Market Systems that puts the needs, abilities,
and interests of kids first. This system makes sure you won’t miss the
mark whether you’re trying to reach young children or teens, boys or
girls, or whether you’re selling toys, sports equipment, snacks, school
supplies, or software.

Based on the latest child development research, What Kids Buy and
Why is chock-full of provocative information about the cognitive,
emotional, and social needs of each age group. This book tells you
among other things—why 3-through-7-year-olds love things that
transform, why 8-through-12-year-olds love to collect stuff, how the
play patterns of boys and girls differ, and why kids of all ages love
slapstick.

Thanks to a number of important exposés, the sophisticated techniques used to
increase childhood consumption of junk food are now on the public record (Nestle,
2002; Schlosser, 2001). Perhaps the most famous of all has been the campaigns
designed to reduce the amount of water, milk and fruit juice that children consume
and replace them with high sugar drinks. Whatever else we might say about junk
food, it is simply not the case the meteoric growth in the junk food industry over the
last 50 years was caused by pre-existing consumer demand. Junk food is the shining

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example of modern marketing’s credo: ‘create more demand’. To this end, we should remember that there was a time when marketers and advertisers spoke primarily to parents in order to sell products aimed at children. Those days are gone. Marketers and advertisers of junk food now target children directly, bypassing parents. Corporations have spent billions of dollars attempting to create, in their words, a deep and enduring relationship between themselves and children, a relationship in which the role of the parent has been intentionally undermined.

In *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality and Ideology*, Jan Wright and I argued that research into food consumption over the last century has not shown obvious increases in fat intake or total caloric intake over time in Western countries. To my knowledge, this is a point that has not been disputed. However, there is a branch of food consumption research which measures what is called ‘food disappearance’ (interested readers might consult French, Story & Jeffrey, 2001). In short, what this research shows is that the production of high-fat and high-sugar food and drink has soared at precisely the same time as Western obesity has increased. The simple question that these researchers ask is, if people’s total caloric intake is not going up, where is all this junk food going?

The answer to this question is probably complicated, but part of the answer is that often people do not report ‘snack food’ when researchers ask them to recall and estimate their normal daily eating patterns. In this context it is interesting to note that some researchers have argued that obesity rates are lower in countries like France and Italy, not because the meals prepared in these countries are lower in sugar and fat (very often they aren’t), but because of the much lower incidence of eating between meals (Banwell, Shipley & Strazdins, 2007). And just as the makers of junk food deliberately set out to change what children drink, so too have they succeeded in their attempts in many countries to make high calorie food available and consumable at all times and in all places (Schlosser, 2001). Junk food’s premeditated assault on patterns of living and eating easily ranks amongst the largest exercises in social engineering of the last 50 years.

In short, my view is that we need to be careful before believing experts who tell us that rising obesity is a hugely complex issue and that all aspects of our lives are implicated. Is this true? Automation in the home and the work place has been happening for at least a century. Sports remain popular amongst children. Research confirms that while recreational physical activity varied over the last century, there has been no precipitous change. And yet, obesity experts say that obesity rates in Western countries rose suddenly from the 1970s onwards having been basically stable for decades. In other words, we are being asked to believe that a sudden and dramatic change in obesity levels was caused by a convergence of slowly changing factors. To me, this seems implausible. If obesity rates really did ‘explode’, as we are often told, is it fanciful to suspect a single trigger?

Even if I am mistaken about its decisive role in rising obesity levels, it remains the case that high-fat and high sugar food and drink is currently consumed in unprecedented amounts by children and that enormous pressure is currently being exerted in order to protect this market. This pressure is not only coming from the corporations who make the products. Pro-business think tanks and lobby groups have
also joined the fray. Take the following foray into obesity policy by Canada’s Fraser Institute that dismisses social policy that restricts food manufacturers and argues:

> If governments decide to act, however, the best way to account for the costs the obese impose on society is to require these individuals to bear those costs that result from their decisions. This could be as simple as introducing health premiums scaled by the cost that individual’s lifestyle choices imposes on others. A scaled premium not only solves the problem of an increased burden on all Canadians created by the few who may be able to choose otherwise, but also gives those who are obese a reason to lose the extra pounds. (Esmail & Brown, 2005)

The message here is simple: junk food makers should be allowed to continue maximising profits while parents and children must find their own ways of coping in an environment they have little control over. If they fail, they will only have themselves to blame (see Eberstadt, 2003 for another striking example of this line of argument). Australia’s current health minister, Tony Abbott, recently said much the same thing in TV interview: “In the end, if people are obese, it's because they’re eating too much or they’re exercising too little, and the answer is in the hands of those individuals.” Ideological allegiances aside, I would simply ask whether this is an accurate summary of the world we share: is the answer to obesity in the hands of individual parents and children?

The makers of junk food now insist that they should be allowed to ‘self-regulate’ their advertising and retail behaviour. But is this enough? If obesity really is as serious a problem as global warming, as the experts warn, would self-regulation be enough?

*Schools on the front line*

The luxury of self-regulation is not likely to be afforded to public schools. I have read dozens of academic papers and newspaper articles which claim, as a matter of common sense, that government schools must be placed on the front line of the war on obesity. This is an idea that, as far as I can tell, politicians of every stripe are willing to go along with. The reasoning here is usually that school children are a captive audience and that it is always better to “get ‘em young”.

The ease with which (predominantly male) medical and exercise science researchers have felt able to tell (predominantly female) school teachers how they should do their job and what their responsibilities should be never fails to take my breath away. Readers not struck by the blithe arrogance of the research community in this regard might try to imagine the reaction if groups of primary school teachers started calling for obesity researchers to study children’s reading and writing skills. However, in Australia and New Zealand we live in cultures that have become accustomed to the demonisation and political marginalisation of the teaching profession, such that it is now a group that is far more likely to be spoken at than to speak. Faced with complex and controversial social problems, it is now common for politicians to call for school programs to be developed, not because schools are the best place to solve social problems, but because they can be seen to be acting while minimising political fallout.
It is not surprising, therefore, that all manner of ill thought out, mean-spirited, bizarre and potentially dangerous anti-obesity policies are being advocated and, in some schools, implemented. We now have school weigh-ins, compulsory exercise sessions, lunch box checks, regular fitness testing and even bans on ‘sausage sizzles’ and birthday cakes. On a recent period of teacher-education work in Canada I witnessed something called ‘desk aerobics’ where, at the sound of a tone on the school public address system, children stopped and waved their arms and legs around for a couple of minutes – while sitting at their desk – and then went back to whatever it was they were doing!

There is not space here to talk in detail about some of the other more dubious things that are happening in the name of fighting obesity in Australian schools, but I will mention two emerging issues. First, we have now seen the first law suits brought against educational authorities by young women suffering from eating disorders. In a Queensland case a young woman claimed that regular school weigh-ins fuelled her weight anxiety. It is difficult to know whether this kind of action will succeed or grow more numerous in the future. However, in my view is not difficult to imagine that an anti-obesity crusade in schools, in which children are subject to regular physical testing and monitoring, will produce its fair share of casualties.

Second, any sports scientist will tell you that running physical activity programs designed to help children lose weight or increase their fitness is not a straightforward matter. Not only is making compulsory exercise both fun and effective extremely difficult, children are much more likely to injure themselves when they are exhausted or even simply exercising at the limits of their capacity. Most teachers, particularly primary teachers, are not experts in this area. In a context where obesity and weight loss are the goals – whether this is stated or not – the risk of injury for children and legal liability for teachers is increased. The zeal of anti-obesity feeling in the community, of which teachers are a part, means that some people will simply go too far. To me, this seems inevitable.

And yet, if obesity were as big a problem as global warming, would we be leaving it to teachers and mothers running school canteens? Would we be using school weigh-ins and fitness testing about which there are obvious reasons, grounded in research, to doubt their efficacy in improving health or lowering body weight?

If we were really serious about fighting obesity in schools we would employ large numbers of qualified physical activity coordinators (not teachers) in schools to run organised physical activity, we would take steps to allow and promote children’s spontaneous physical play, we would clear up the legal liability concerns that many teachers have about student injury, and we would implement and resource high quality physical education programs, programs in which children’s physical skills and fitness were treated with at least the same amount of attention and seriousness afforded other areas of the curriculum. Few if any of these things are likely to happen on a large scale, not because they cost too much, but because, apart from a few members of the obesity research community, people realise that obesity is not as serious as global warming.

Epilogue
How do we know that we do not have an obesity crisis on our hands?

First, we know it because there are people who talk about schools as the front line of the war on obesity. Some readers may think calls for anti-obesity programs in schools is a sign that we do have a crisis on our hands? In fact, the opposite is true.

Second, we know there is no crisis because anyone who suggests regulating the behaviour of businesses that advertise or sell junk food is immediately accused of promoting the ‘nanny state’. This suspicion certainly appears to be alive and well within the current Australian government.

Third, Noel Pearson has won the argument in Australia about ‘passive welfare’ and the protection of Aboriginal children. Why? Because the problems to which he draws attention are seen as sufficiently serious to trump other considerations including human rights and the freedom of commerce. If obesity really were a crisis there would be far greater appetite to restrict the availability of high-fat and high-sugar food and the freedoms of companies who make it.

In his landmark work *The Mirage of Health*, René Dubos (1996/1959) reminded readers that, as time goes by, the prevalence of some diseases goes up while others go down. There is no disease free future waiting for us. And despite absurd claims about obesity driving down life expectancy in Western countries, most health authorities say that the majority of us lucky enough to live in Western countries live longer and healthier lives than ever before and that this shows no sign of changing (for example, see Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004). Meanwhile, busy teachers who should be teaching children are being asked to sign up to a war on obesity by implementing measures that will make little difference and cost them precious time. No doubt, school based anti-obesity measures will have reporting responsibilities built in to them and these too will take up teachers’ time.

In the middle of all this are the bodies of children which will, it seems, be weighed, measured, made to rote learn dubious factoids about physical activity, and required (in true cultural revolution style) to repeat the mantra that an inactive life leads to an early death.

The idea of making schools and children the front on the war on obesity is happening because teachers are basically good people and governments have decided that they are a constituency who can be imposed upon without political cost, unlike policies that run the risk of being interpreted as anti-business. The result of this is that we do end up at war with children and their bodies, precisely and only because in the whole debate obesity they are the least powerful, a point which the makers of junk food have understood better than any of us.

References


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