

Junk Food

Last year, a South Carolina woman was charged with criminal neglect when her 14 year old son had reached a lethal weight of 555 pounds. While most people would agree that it is neglect on her part, is it fair to hold her responsible when food giants like McDonalds have expanded their advertising campaigns aimed at children?

Obesity rates are on the rise, enough to make it a top concern, not only for medical practitioners but also for politicians. Currently, Superior Courts in all states except for California have included “morbid obesity” under the legal definition of medical neglect. Obesity is defined as having a Body Mass Index (BMI) of greater than or equal to 30, whereas a healthy BMI ranges from 20-25. Obesity affects more than 1 in 3 adults and 1 in 6 children. It has been associated with many preventable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus type II, musculoskeletal problems, sleep apnea and many others. Obesity affects the psychosocial development of children due to the social stigmas associated with their physical appearance. Among adults, it causes an economic burden as a result of lost work productivity as well as an increase in insurance premiums and medical expenses. In 2002, healthcare costs related to obesity were estimated at \$92.6 billion.

What can the United States do about the obesity epidemic? While the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) spends \$400 million each year for nutrition and health education programs in efforts to teach Americans to eat healthier and exercise more, McDonalds alone spends \$1.1 billion each year just for advertising and promoting their products. Approximately \$154 million is spent on Coke and Diet Coke advertisements, \$66 million on M & M’s candy advertisements, and \$56 million on Lays Potato advertisements. Clearly the junk food giants, with their massive advertising campaigns, overshadow any health food marketing or health education campaigns that are currently in existence.

Recently, many public health officials and policy makers have proposed adding a “junk food tax,” an

additional tax specifically for purchasing junk food. This idea has definitely caused heated controversy among policy makers, as the implementation of such a tax would have various consequences associated with it. Some possible victories for health food advocates is that a sizeable amount of the revenue generated from a junk food tax could fund health education and obesity prevention/intervention programs in schools and primary health care settings. Taxing junk foods would also increase their price, therefore, making them no longer the cheaper alternative for people to purchase, and would result in an increased consumption of healthy foods. Ideally, all of these consequences would result in a reduction in obesity prevalence across the United States.

Opponents of the junk food tax will argue that people have a right to eat whatever foods they want; and indeed it is a natural right. These would say that the government has no right to interfere in the matter of one’s personal eating choices. However, many others would argue that once an individual’s choices begin to negatively affect others, such as when non-obese taxpayers must share the burden of higher insurance premiums due to the medical problems and costs associated with obesity, or when parents such as the South Carolina woman allow a child’s personal choices to become fatal, then the unregulated access to junk food becomes a problem. The public ultimately takes financial responsibility for those who cannot pay for their obesity-related medical expenses.

Taxing junk food may be one of many steps that need to be taken to address the obesity epidemic in the United States. There are an array of issues that need to be considered among policy makers, public health officials, researchers and stakeholders prior to proposing and implementing such a tax. For example, detailed set of criteria would be needed to determine which foods will be considered “junk foods.” Most importantly, collaboration and agreement among the food and beverage industry, policymakers, and public health officials is necessary in order to effectively address the obesity epidemic.

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