

EDITOR'S COMMENT

Obesity – are we off the mark?



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There are myriad reports, papers, conferences around the world on the rising tide of non-communicable diseases globally. And many of these are thought to be intimately linked to increasing rates of obesity.

Conventional wisdom tells us that the cause of obesity is an imbalance between calories in and calories out – and that a high-fat diet and lack of exercise are to blame for our rapidly increasing girths.

But, if we look back through the literature, as science journalist Gary Taubes did, we will find that only a couple of decades ago, most medical scientists working in nutrition, recommended a different approach to weight loss and indeed, the control of blood sugar in diabetics. In those days – and I remember them as a dieting teenager – it was carbohydrates that were the ‘fattening foods’. And people found, albeit anecdotally in many cases, that if you restricted carbohydrates people lost weight – even without increasing exercise – and that diabetics could control their blood sugar. Historically, indigenous populations in which the Western diseases of coronary artery disease and type 2 diabetes were virtually unknown, started to develop these diseases when they changed over to a Western diet – not in terms of fats – but in terms of white flour and sugar. Many of these peoples had traditionally high-fat diets on which they apparently did not suffer Western diseases.

Over time, however, conventional wisdom changed. We were able to measure things like cholesterol in people’s blood and these numbers started to be regarded as synonyms of disease. As the science of lipid biochemistry developed so too did the idea of fat being the culprit in weight gain. At the same time, there was a shift in the way that fat people were regarded. As they became more common in the community, and the relationship between obesity and morbidity started to emerge, fat people were regarded as lazy and lacking in will power. After all, it is a simple relationship between calories in and calories out isn’t it?

As dietary guidelines have changed, with carbohydrates, particularly grains, recommended as the major portion of our diets and fats relegated to a tiny percentage of our energy intake, along with less reliance on protein sources, people have got fatter and fatter. But if you look at data from the USA, for example, you will find that in fact people’s fat intakes have dropped dramatically. And yet, the population is getting fatter and fatter. Similar patterns are apparent around the world, including the developing world.



As fat and protein intake has fallen, people have replaced the calories they used to get from these sources with sugars and carbohydrates. Look at the label on a carton of fat-free yogurt – it contains an enormous amount of carbohydrate – and the same goes for most fat-free or low-fat foods.

People, including type 2 diabetics, are encouraged to eat large quantities of carbohydrates, admittedly the choices are supposed to be mainly whole-grains, but the emphasis is very much on carbohydrate intake.

Now, as a dieting teenager all those years ago, I cut out ‘fattening foods’ – bread, potatoes, sweets, sugar, rice and pasta – and I lost lots of weight – and I actually didn’t have all that much to lose in the first place! Recently, I have tried a similar approach – encouraged by my colleague Tim Noakes – and again, I am losing weight (as fat mass), although not at the same rate, which probably has to do with my evening wine intake!

After reading Taubes’ book – ever a conventional wisdom skeptic – I am starting to wonder if we haven’t got it wrong. There are a lot of things that still need explaining. Why, for example, in the face of the rising tide of obesity is life expectancy still rising, albeit with a pretty poor quality of life in later years for most people? Increased exercise generally does make people lose weight – all my friends who ran Comrades this year lost weight – so there must still be some relationship between calories in and calories out. However, I am no longer convinced by the argument that ‘a calorie is a calorie’. In Taubes’ words, there are probably ‘good calories and bad calories’. The debate needs to start and the research needs to be done.

Taubes G. Good Calories, Bad Calories: Fats, Carbs and the Controversial Science of Diet and Health. New York: Anchor Books, 2008.

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