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Tackling obesity from many angles

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The University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH) is currently defining what it means to truly integrate medicine and public health under one roof, which we believe has never been done before. This transformation is pushing us to identify challenging health problems that could best benefit from this interwoven medical-public health approach, and obesity clearly falls within that category.

As we all are so acutely aware, obesity—and particularly obesity in childhood—is a major health concern in Wisconsin and the entire country. It is a highly complex issue that will require the skills of many people in our community to fully understand and eradicate. Researchers representing a variety of perspectives must examine the genetic and molecular components influencing the development of obesity as well as the social, environmental, and behavioral causes. Educators must teach the next generation of physicians and other health care professionals about the multifaceted approaches that are required to prevent and treat obesity.

It is encouraging that Wisconsin is beginning to seriously address obesity, and we are doing so in some very creative ways, thanks to support from the Wisconsin Partnership Fund (WPP). Since its formation, the WPP has funded 16 community programs that are directly related to obesity and physical activity, each involving a UW academic partner. Funding in this

category, which has almost topped \$3 million, represents 17% of total programs funded by the WPP.

I recently had the privilege of seeing one of these innovative programs in action in La Crosse. Campus leaders, faculty, and students at UW-La Crosse, in partnership with SMPH adjunct professor Stacy Her, MD, of the Gundersen Clinic and representatives of the school district have joined forces to increase physical activity for area children and youth with disabilities. Many kids who have never been active in the past now are taking part in a variety of sports.

In Ashland County, another program aims to prevent obesity in American Indian children by developing a family-based obesity prevention program in 3 tribal communities. This partnership between the Great Lakes Inter-Tribal Council and Alexandra Adams, MD, PhD, of the SMPH Department of Family Medicine is training community members to serve as mentors who make home visits in order to encourage tribal members' participation in sports and other physical activity and to increase their knowledge of nutritious food choices.

In Oneida and Vilas counties, additional innovative collaborations are taking place. Marshfield Clinic Research Foundation and Thomas Gabert, MD, of the SMPH Department of Family Medicine are collaborating with local school districts there to work with medical providers in planning community inter-

ventions that aim to improve the eating and activity habits of local children.

A statewide program called Wisconsin Partnership for Childhood Fitness is attempting to decrease childhood obesity by developing a voluntary fitness promotion, instruction, and tracking program in selected middle schools throughout the state. Partners in this program—the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the Department of Health and Family Services, UW Population Health Institute and Aaron Carrel, MD, of the SMPH Department of Pediatrics—hope to create a “best test” for assessing childhood fitness and plan to develop an interactive Web site outlining successful fitness strategies and resources.

Other unique programs, also funded by the WPP, include the creation of an Active Recreation Guide meant to increase family physical activity and education in Marathon County; the launch of a small project in which doctors help people integrate bicycling into their daily lives; and the development of an initiative that exposes children to fresh fruits and vegetables by encouraging them to garden.

To defeat obesity we will need to bring all of our resources to bear. As an integrated school of medicine and public health, I believe the SMPH will soon be uniquely poised to tackle this problem. One critical way will be to continue to develop programs that encourage people to participate in sports and remain physically active throughout their lives.

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