

We are more than what we eat

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When I returned to Wisconsin in 1993 after a 25-year professional exile in the wilds of Massachusetts and North Carolina, I remember going to a restaurant and being stunned at the size of the portions people were eating. I told my family that it was strange to be back where everyone had “Midwestern portions.” Since that time, it appears from the data on obesity of the general US population, Midwestern portions have become the norm. The factors behind these changes are the source for many popular books in recent years that are well worth reading. *Fast Food Nation*; *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*; *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, and many others are making us read food labels from a new perspective. One will never look at a horizon full of corn plants with the same eyes as before reading these books, even before the gas price climb or world food shortages. And one never goes to the Wisconsin State Fair without being amazed at what people can eat in a single day.

In this issue of the *Journal*, 2 articles address strategies to change the way that children learn about eating. Clearly there is not, and never will be, a “silver bullet”

approach to treating obesity. Jamelske and colleagues describe results from a statewide intervention to promote lower calorie fruits and vegetables in schools (Preliminary Findings from an Evaluation of the USDA Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program in Wisconsin Schools. *WMJ*. 2008;107(5):225-230.) As my grandchildren are encouraged to follow the “one bite is nice” strategy to try new things, the children in the test schools are both educated and encouraged to see fruits and vegetables as acceptable and the study shows that their attitudes do change and their willingness to try these foods changes as well. One important finding was that children demonstrated a willingness to try new foods—but not at home. Parents, as in most things, are critical to any attempts to change behaviors. Children do not ignore parents and a variety of studies attempt to affect parents’ attitudes and behaviors as well as children. Evidence-based studies of factors that affect the prevalence of childhood obesity repeatedly show that family behavior trumps almost any other attempts to intervene.¹

In that regard, the study by Joose and colleagues attempts to approach entire families as the

point of intervention. While their data are too small and too recent to look at long-term effects, their study shows that parents have a higher level of change in attitude than their children and that is a positive finding—in the long run. Sustaining those changes is the real task of community-wide interventions such as theirs. Supporting the efforts through school food choices and education can only be a good thing.

One of the larger problems of obesity in our society is that the forces that affect it are often at the societal level and are more resistant to changes.² Changing a culture is a slow process, changing factors such as poverty, neighborhood safety, and the influence of advertising—all of which have been shown to heavily influence the prevalence of obesity—are reasons for a national approach to causes as well as effects of obesity.³

As a society, we are good at finding something to blame: I blame sugar, I blame portions, I blame television, and I blame parents. While all of these may contribute to the problem, labeling childhood obesity as an “epidemic” doesn’t really help either. Such a characterization carries the powerful message that obesity is something we “catch” rather than something

we do. The challenge is to take on the changes necessary to work with the forces that relate to obesity without stigmatizing either children or their families. Both of the articles in this issue of the *Journal* take positive approaches and realize that they—and we—are in it for the long run. We can all learn to be more tolerant of those among us who struggle with obesity through understanding, support, and encouragement while working to change the forces that affect the local and national cultures of consumption that we, collectively, have created and we, collectively and individually, can change.

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