
OBESITY EPIDEMIC

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By Jim Jordal

The newest epidemic on the social/political horizon is obesity. Alarming numbers of Americans now class as obese and the numbers seem destined to rise for at least another generation. We've already survived epidemics of swine flu, Asian flu, AIDS, and what have you, so why be concerned about this one?

Obesity carries the potential to drastically transform the American social, political, economic systems, not to mention that of health delivery. Why? Because it's not an epidemic with a single, simple cause like the flu. Obesity has its roots in almost every aspect of national life and human behavior: personal responsibility, agribusiness intransigence, corporate greed, government complicity, abuses in the free enterprise market system, health care failures, pollution, global warming, weather patterns, and the human ego.

Projections of the operating costs of our health system over the next generation are nothing short of appalling. When the already massive cost of retirement programs faces the addition of 10,000 new applicants every day, that number becomes even more frightening.

It seems quite obvious that sometime in the near future the "bank" will break as our money machine is overcome by human needs virtually beyond comprehension. Something will have to give. Unfortunately, it's the very lives and futures of average Americans that are now offered to appease the gluttonous Molech Ammonite god who demanded sacrifices of human children) of finance. Retirees, military veterans, children, racial and cultural minorities, workers, and the poor; not to mention the decaying infrastructure, education, pollution, and resource depletion—all will be negatively impacted as the wave of obesity threatens our national wealth.

Medical professionals hope that obesity will yield to personal responsibility concerning eating habits and increased exercise. If that fails they offer scores of new and expensive medical procedures. But where does corporate restraint enter the equation? How can we expect the public to control their dietary habits when almost every TV commercial touts junk food in massive quantities accompanied by a sedentary lifestyle of conspicuous consumption and leisure.

That's just advertising and the media. How about the agricultural corporate giants that insist as a matter of right to be allowed to produce whatever types of food make them the most profits. That this "food" has almost no real food value matters hardly at all because it makes money. These agribusiness giants also claim the right to patent genetically-modified plants (labelled Frankenfood by some ecologists) able to withstand massive doses of chemical pesticides and herbicides—who cares about the honey bees or the birds, or people for that matter?

We need new thinking willing to risk stepping "outside the box" of the accepted ways of doing things. It's encouraging to see New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg willing to risk attack by food producers and the soda pop-guzzling public for planning to limit the size of sugared soft drinks in NYC to 16 oz. It's also heartening to see media giant Disney promising to remove all advertisements for unhealthy breakfast foods and snacks from their programming by 2015. These are both situations where powerful economic and political figures have decided to swim upstream against the wishes of corporations and much of the public. Let's hope that they are the spearhead for much greater change in the producing and advertising of what America eats.

The days are ending when individuals can do whatever they wish to their bodies with no backlash from society. As medical costs escalate dramatically citizens are asking why they should pay increased insurance premiums to cover extravagant costs for those who refuse to care for themselves. This attitude can only increase as skyrocketing medical costs threaten our economic future.

Nobody is talking about aid for those who cannot help themselves. That sort of justice remains an integral part of Christian charity. Jesus commanded that we care for the poor and helpless, and I think most Americans are willing to do this. But the backlash appears to be against those who choose not to care for themselves for various reasons.

The answer lies as usual in the commands of Christ that we love the Lord God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. If we did this food corporations would not sacrifice children's health in the search for profits. Neither would individuals refuse to care for their health. Neither would agribusiness giants damage the ecological system and threaten the genetic future of food products with reckless practices designed mainly to make more money. It seems to me that if we really cared for one another we would at least do the minimum in caring for ourselves, our neighbors, and our planet.