

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Obesity: Is it Really a Disease?”



No doubt, the obesity epidemic is in full stride. Some researchers have said, "Even a small pot belly can increase the risk of heart disease," They said, "waist size, rather than overall body weight, is a key indicator of heart disease and that adding a few inches to the waist increased the risk of damage in the arteries, even if body weight remained within the normal range." They have said that even a waist circumference of 32in (81.3cm) for a woman, and 37in (94cm) for a man represents a "significant" raised risk. In June of 2013, the American Medical Association (AMA) decided to label "obesity as a disease." Yet, the official definition of "disease" hardly fits the obese condition, i.e., "a disordered or incorrectly functioning organ, part, structure, or system of the body resulting from the effect of genetic or developmental errors, infection, poisons, nutritional deficiency or imbalance, toxicity, or unfavorable environmental factors." So, why is the AMA now calling obesity a disease? According to Geoffrey Kabat, "It was a decision that went against the recommendation of the Council of Science and Public Health." Dr. Bradley Fox and his colleagues believe this is the reason: It is to "Make doctors more readily recognize and address obesity, hopefully to aid in reimbursement from insurance companies for the treatment of obesity -- and, to take it a step further, to promote payment for the 2 new obesity drugs that it just so happens recently came to market." And, even athletes can fall into the "obese" category and they are not considered to be diseased. Obesity is technically defined as having a BMI greater than 30 kg/m² or more. Could it be that we should once again "follow the money?" There has been an explosion in treatment of obese patients, with lap bands and small bowel bypass surgery (bariatric surgery), including the introduction of a bariatric product line linked to weight reduction. Curiously or coincidentally, two new obesity drugs, Qsymia® and Belviq®, were both released shortly before this change in the AMA obesity policy. So, now doctors can bill insurance policies or the government for payments to treat the "obesity disease." But, there has been no significant up tick in sales of "diet" medications thus far. And, no doubt, obesity is a condition that warrants medical attention, because of its relation to diabetes, heart disease, etc. Should we call gray hair or a sedentary life style a "disease?"

In the America that I love, we know that obesity can be "treated" with reduction in portion sizes (calorie intake), increased intake of fruits and vegetables and exercise as tolerated. Even under-desk pedal devices work in the office. So, watch out for crafty "pill pushers."

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