

Obesity is a personal responsibility, not a disease

By Gary Johns, The Australian, 5 October 2016

The five highest rating television episodes in Britain this year were five episodes of *The Great British Bake Off*. There were 13 million viewers across the UK for each episode, including Edinburgh, from where this column was written. You think that Brits are not obsessed with food?

In Australia, *Zumbo's Just Desserts*, *MasterChef* and even *Nigella Bites* are popular. We too love food. There is, however, a down side. Too many Scots, Poms, Aussies and many more are fat slobs. Obesity is on the rise. Obesity kills.

If we are what we eat, what are we if we are obese? Are the obese architects of their own demise? If so, why should anyone come to their aid? This is a serious public policy issue. Public health officials want obesity categorised as a disease. What follows is that Medicare will cover the condition and you and I will pay for it. To prevent this crisis, huge preventive measures are prescribed.

For example, last week a British government minister berated the entire food industry for serving "large portions" at restaurants and fast-food outlets. Has it come to this? Blame industry for consumer gluttony?

By the way, strictly speaking I am supposed to use the expression, "people with obesity", rather than obese people. Spot the difference, it is not my fault. My "obesogenic environment" made me do it!

As an example, it is not beyond possibility that, in the near future, mandatory reporting of severe childhood obesity will lead to children taken from parents.

The annual cost of obesity in Australia has been estimated variously at between \$37 billion and \$58bn a year. But this is where the funny games begin, the game of turning private loss into public cost.

Much of the so-called cost of obesity is loss of wellbeing. The correct response to these costs is to let the obese carry their own costs. These losses are not a cost to society but to individuals. That part which is shared because of public health insurance is of concern. There is a solution: to disallow the costs associated with obesity.

The difficulty is that obesity is a disease in the eyes of some medicos. Once it becomes so, it may be impossible to have an individual carry the burden of disease alone.

Yet the solution to obesity requires one simple exercise: push the chair away from the table. Unfortunately, too many fail to exercise this restraint. As a result, nearly 64 per cent of adult Australians are overweight or obese. More than 27 per cent of Australian children aged five to 17 are overweight or obese. The figures in Britain and the US are similar.

And the hoary conspiracy that fast-food outlets deliberately set up in poor neighbourhoods is just dumb. Do you really think it requires a conspiracy to work out lack of restraint is class related?

Do-gooders have no idea about budgeting, suggesting that the poor can afford only junk food to fill a family's stomach. I can cook mum's cottage pie (recipe supplied for a fee) for a lot less than a Big Mac family meal or equivalent takeaway.

Rural Health Minister Fiona Nash rightly suggests "governments can't force-feed healthy food to people". But she established the Healthy Food Partnership to try. Australia is at the beginning of a major struggle for the hearts, minds and stomachs of its citizens.

Britain legislated for a sugar tax and for a while suggested restrictions on junk food marketing and advertising. Instead, the industry agreed to reduce by 20 per cent the amount of sugar in products such as cereals, desserts, yoghurts and sweets. Manufacturers who reduce sugar in their products will escape the sugar tax.

The money accrued by the levy on sugary drinks will fund breakfast clubs and sport. Schools will be asked to give pupils an extra 30 minutes a day of physical activity, and parents and carers will be encouraged to get their children moving for a further 30 minutes.

The target set for sugar reduction is flawed because it focuses on the role of a single nutrient when obesity is caused by excess calories from any nutrient.

Obesity is a big problem. An existential problem. Libertarians are in denial and the Left sees an opportunity to control the lives of all. The middle will muddle through, but the buck has to stop with you and your mouth — and your medical bills.

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