

America Weighs In

April 2004

A study recently released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed that obesity-related deaths rose by 33 percent over the past decade with obesity catching up to and poised to overtake tobacco as the leading cause of preventable death in the United States.

“The increase in America’s waistlines is shrinking our lifelines,” says Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson. “We’ve just gotten too darn fat, ladies and gentlemen, and we are going to do something about it.”

Other experts “weighing in” on the obesity issue include Kenneth Cooper, M.D., M. P. H., aerobics advocate and founder of the Cooper Institute in Dallas. “The lack of a balanced diet coupled with a lack of regular physical activity are leading to such conditions as heart disease, diabetes, weight gain and depression. In obese children, we are also noticing an increase in type II diabetes. Dr. William Klish of Baylor College of Medicine in Houston has reported that children who develop type II adult-onset diabetes before 14 years of age may be shortening their lifespan by 17 to 27 years.

The fundamental cause of weight gain is energy intake... if we eat FEWER calories than we burn, we will have a negative energy balance and lose weight. If we eat MORE calories than we burn, we will have a positive energy balance and gain weight. We must seek policies that encourage WELLNESS. So let’s enact policies that will keep children fit and active, and teach them the importance of a balanced diet. Specifically, we need to focus less on drastic, unrealistic dietary mandates that single out specific foods and focus more on a sensible, balanced approach to caloric intake. We must also motivate Americans of all ages to avoid inactivity and get at least 30 minutes of some type of aerobic activity daily. And while this approach of combining balanced and caloric-restricted diets with physical activity will not be a “quick fix,” it will produce long-term benefits in the form of improved quality and quantity of life.

Ultimately, individuals have to make their own choices about the foods they eat and the level of physical activity they engage in. Government can and should provide information to help consumers make informed choices. After all, this discussion is not simply about weight gain, it’s about health. And reduced calories and exercise are the keys to good health.”

Excerpted from the testimony of Kenneth Cooper, M.D., M. P. H., before the House Education Reform Subcommittee, “Hearing on Encouraging Healthy Choices for Healthy Children” on February 12, 2004.