

Obesity epidemic must be addressed at societal level

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jan 12, 2012

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By Loretta J. Fuddy

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Economics professor Michael L. Marlow noted recently in these pages that obesity rates in Hawaii have “doubled in the last 15 years — making it difficult to argue against a policy that promises a reduction in waistlines.” (“Put state on spending diet rather than impose soda tax,” Island Voices, Star-Advertiser, Dec. 28, 2011).



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But obesity is not just about waistlines. It is a deadly accurate predictor of cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes and other mental and physical ailments that afflict our people of Hawaii. That is why this administration supports both public education and policy change.

Tax policies can encourage people to make healthier choices. For example, due to a comprehensive framework of government policies, tobacco use has dropped tremendously. Smoking rates among high school students in Hawaii decreased 54 percent from 2000 to 2009; adult smoking decreased by 26 percent from 2000 to 2010.

But policies alone are not the “silver bullet” to this significant health epidemic. That is why this administration is emphasizing public education and wants people to look at the facts and the data.

There are many parallels between obesity and tobacco use. It is universally acknowledged that both epidemics over the past few decades were caused by a series of intentional and unintentional societal cues. The tragic result is eight of the 10 leading causes of death are due to tobacco use and obesity.

According to the National Cancer Institute, sugary drinks made up 50 percent of added sugars in diets of U.S. children ages 2 to 18 in 2005 to 2006. These include soda, fruit drinks, sweetened tea and coffee, energy drinks, and any beverage with added sugar. They contain unnecessary calories of no nutritional value.

While sugary drinks alone are not the sole cause of obesity, they are a significant factor. A 2004 study found soft drinks are the single largest contributor of calorie intake in the country. Moreover, a recent study by the University of Hawaii showed that high school girls in Hawaii who consume two cans of sugary drinks per day gain an average of 8 pounds per year; those who drink four cans per day gain 15 pounds per year.

The evidence linking sugary drinks with weight gain is stronger than for any other food category. Most troubling: One in three children entering kindergarten in Hawaii is obese.

Reducing consumption of empty liquid calories makes sense. The state Department of Health has launched a series of statewide TV and radio ads educating people against consuming sugary drinks and encouraging healthier choices. Using federal funds from the “Communities Putting Prevention to Work” initiative, the DOH also produced TV ads targeting those most at-risk for chronic disease, and radio ads for the “Take the LEAP” campaign to increase awareness of the dangers associated with obesity and challenge viewers to commit to healthier lifestyles. These and other efforts must continue as we work to address rising health costs.

One of the major priorities of the Health Department is to reduce chronic disease and health risks, and our best approach is to reduce obesity in children, adolescents and adults. Hawaii, like the rest of the nation, is faced with an obesity epidemic.

In the last few decades, more deaths and illnesses have occurred from chronic diseases than from contagious diseases in Hawaii, and worldwide. These latter-day plagues like cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes cannot be treated with antibiotics, but are preventable. They are clearly caused by society-induced and promoted factors, and therefore to be most effective, the remedies must be societally based. People haven't changed, but our food and built environment have changed. Therefore, the restoration of health must be addressed at the societal level.

On vacation: Cynthia Oi, whose column "Under the Sun" appears on Thursdays, is on vacation.

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