

Childhood obesity: What we can do

When we hear someone say “childhood obesity,” what do we think or feel? Do we think, “Oh no, not again, I’m so tired of hearing people get on their soapbox about this.” Do we think, “Well, yes, it is a big problem. If nothing is done perhaps our children in fact will not live as long as our generation. But what can I do about it?” Do we think, “I am trying to do something about childhood obesity, but I can’t do much on my own.”

Ask yourself, “What do I feel or think about childhood obesity, and what can I do about it?”

I attended the first and second National Summits on Obesity in Canada, sponsored by the Canadian Obesity Foundation. Generally speaking, researchers and practitioners at these meetings have stated that obesity (including childhood obesity) is steadily increasing, and that it is a very complex problem that needs complex solu-

tions. It seems to me that such statements only serve to immobilize us—making us feel that we cannot begin to attack such a complex problem.

As we know, the rate of childhood obesity is getting worse—in fact, it has tripled in the last 25 years. And obesity tends to worsen as we get older. Recent data indicate Americans are 20 lbs heavier than in the 1990s, with 61% of Americans listed as overweight or obese. Canadians follow right behind at 59%.

The Canadian Obesity Foundation has attempted to simplify obesity with the following statement:

“Most overweight and obesity problems in childhood are caused by children eating too much and not exercising enough. Weight gain happens when energy ingested (food and drink) is more than energy burned off (physical activity).”

Thank goodness someone has finally simplified this complex problem. Clearly this enables us to find a simple way to reverse the trend of increasing childhood obesity rates: an increase in physical activity.

But wait—our kids are required to have 30 minutes of daily physical activity at school and surely they must get some other activity to reach the 60-minute target of physical activity every day. Well, the Active Healthy Kids Canada report of 2011 found that only 9% of boys and 4% of girls reach this target as determined by the Canadian Health Measures Survey. We’re not doing very well on the activity side of the equation.

Be Active Every Day

This year’s BCMA president, pediatrician Dr Nasir Jetha, has identified the improved health of our children as one of his goals. With his support, the Athletics and Recreation committee of COHP is promoting a month-long lead-up to the World Health Organization’s Move for Health Day (10 May 2012), challenging all BC school children to Be Active Every Day. The goal is to have school kids be active for 30 minutes outside of school time every weekday and 60 minutes on weekend days to reach the recommended target

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of Canada's physical activity guideline: 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous exercise.

We have enlisted Canadian astronaut and BCMA member Dr Robert Thirsk (who spent 6 months on the space station in 2010) to help promote Be Active Every Day.

Doctors can help

We are asking BC doctors to contact schools in their area and invite students to take up the challenge of being active for at least 30 minutes outside of school time each day during the month before Move for Health Day.

When doctors ask "What can I do?" I respond that we can do a lot when we pool our efforts. Let's do our best to get all our school kids to be active every day for 1 month this year, from 10 April to 10 May. Doctors can then visit local participating

schools on or around 10 May to congratulate students for their participation, and present them with a certificate from the BCMA. We hope this will kickstart a continuing increased level of activity and help tip the scales of obesity in a favorable direction.

We will be continuing to ask BC doctors to participate in the annual Walk with your Doc event and invite their patients to go for a symbolic walk on or during the week of 10 May for Move for Health Day. Watch for more information about this initiative in the BCMA E-news and in the *BC Medical Journal*.

Let's increase the activity level of BC school children (including our own) and be good role models by being more active ourselves.

—Ron Wilson, MD, Chair, Athletics and Recreation Committee

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