

The Journal welcomes Letters to the Editor; if found suitable, they will be published as space allows. Letters should be typed double-spaced, should not exceed 400 words, and are subject to abridgment and other editorial changes in accordance with journal style.

MANAGEMENT OF OBESITY

To the Editor:

Regarding the article by William E. Straw, MD, entitled "Obesity—A Killer Disease?" (*J Fam Pract* 1986; 22:461-462), there are two points that should be made. The first is that studies looking at obesity do not separate the health effects of obesity from the health effects of physical inactivity or social class, both of which are positively correlated with relative body weight. Data showing increased mortality and morbidity in obese patients may indicate association but does not prove causality. An equally plausible hypothesis is that it is the decreased physical activity which causes the increased mortality and morbidity.

The second point is that there is no significant evidence that any treatment we have for obesity is now effective—at least when looking at results over periods of five years or more. An increasingly detailed literature on body weight control documents the importance of neuroregulatory mechanisms in controlling body weight, as in many other aspects of human biology.

Therefore, for physicians to "fuss" a lot about obesity will probably be counterproductive to the physician-patient relationship,

encourage the use of fad diets, contribute to the incidence of eating disorders, and add to the already burdensome load of guilt and inadequacy that many obese patients sustain.

Physicians should encourage their patients to stay in good physical condition through some aerobic exercise and to let the control of body weight be one limited aspect of this. It is not helpful for physicians to deal with the problem of obesity in isolation.

John W. Beasley, MD
Department of Family Medicine
and Practice
University of Wisconsin
Medical School
Madison

The preceding letter was referred to Dr. Straw, who responds as follows:

Dr. Beasley correctly reaffirms the article's statement that obesity is a "... largely untreatable disease." The failure of the studies to separate the health effects of obesity from the health effects of physical inactivity or social class is unimportant and irrelevant. The fact remains that obesity, whether related to physical inactivity, social class, or dysfunction of a neuro-

regulatory mechanism, poses a significant threat to health and longevity.

By taking a nonjudgmental approach to the patient in pointing out the health implications of obesity and in educating the patient in proper nutrition and exercise, the physician should in fact reduce the use of fad diets and protect patients from developing eating disorders such as anorexia.

William E. Straw, MD
Palo Alto Medical Foundation
Palo Alto, California

THREAT OF NUCLEAR WAR

To the Editors:

The threat of nuclear war is an issue that all thinking people must confront and somehow integrate into their view of the world. Unfortunately, many adults demonstrate a strong reluctance and inability to discuss questions of nuclear war. They commonly say it is out of their hands and display a flat affect and disregard, which Lifton describes as "psychic numbing."¹ Not surprisingly, many parents and teachers neglect to discuss this issue with their children. Nevertheless, not only are children aware of

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the potential of nuclear war, but they are also subject to the anxiety and fears that accompany this knowledge.

During 1978 to 1980, Beardslee and Mack² surveyed a large number of children about their attitudes and feelings on nuclear weapons. Their study focused on the concerns of high school students, yet they report that most children are aware of nuclear weapons by the age of 12 years. To better understand the feelings that these younger children have toward nuclear war and toward their view of the future, I surveyed a number of junior high school students and report the results here.

Fifty-four sixth graders from a middle-class town in central Massachusetts were surveyed using a variation of Beardslee and Mack's questionnaire. The average age of the children in this study was 11.8 years, and most of the children describe being aware of nuclear weapons by the age of 9 years. The majority of students reported feelings of fear and insecurity about the threat of nuclear war and a distrust of the adults responsible for using nuclear weapons. Their opinions were not simply emotional ones; many students saw both sides of the issue, recognizing a need for defense while acknowledging the frightening aspects of nuclear weapons. More than two out of three students felt there would be a nuclear war in their lifetime and that it would occur within 25 years.

Few students, however, reported that this threat had affected their plans for the future. Perhaps, living with the threat of nuclear war and incorporating it into one's view of the future is simply too threatening.

This study and others demonstrate that children are aware of the threat of nuclear war and yet fail to integrate the consequences of a nuclear war into their view of the future. Unfortunately, many adults avoid thinking about and discussing nuclear war with their children. We need to educate our children about the facts of nuclear war so that they may feel a greater sense of control over their own lives and, at the very least, improve their understanding of the issues. By being able to accept and discuss the threat of nuclear war, today's children may become better equipped to deal with these issues tomorrow.

Thomas Scammell
University of Massachusetts
Medical School
Worcester, Massachusetts

References

1. Lifton RJ: Testimony before the US House of Representatives, Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1983
2. Beardslee W, Mack J: The impact on children and adolescents of nuclear developments. In *Psychosocial Aspects of Nuclear Developments*. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Association, 1982

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