Environment, not personal choice, causes obesity
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By Govind Rangrass

The members of the Kalamazoo Gazette's Young Editorial Staff writing in the July 8 Our Turn column all concluded that parents are ultimately responsible for ensuring that their children do not fall victim to the epidemic of obesity. This view discounts the extensive research exposing the larger structural problems driving this epidemic: the exploitative marketing practices of the food industry, socioeconomic barriers to healthy foods and obesity-promoting government policies.

The food industry now uses increasingly manipulative advertising tactics than it has in the past. For example, product placements in movies and celebrity/character associations implicitly promote certain brands and behaviors among consumers. Food advertising targets vulnerable populations like children under the age of eight to influence their preference for certain brands and products.

In contrast to the United States, broadcast of food advertisements in Sweden is limited to one per hour -- researchers paralleled this finding with the Swedes' low rate of obesity.

The food industry has also invaded our school systems. In his book, "Food Fight," Professor Kelly Brownell of Yale University provides particularly vivid examples of a school bus covered with Burger King advertisements and children's books featuring Kellogg's labels. As a result, parents view these companies more favorably, believing corporate funding supports education.

The prevalence of pop machines in schools has staggeringly increased over the years, and with it so has the consumption of high-calorie, sugar-supplemented beverages; however, tackling this issue is problematic given the sizable revenue soft drink and food companies grant schools for advertising.

Brownell cites that approximately 300 calories a day in the average diet come from added sugar. Samara J. Nielsen and Barry M. Popkin of the University of North Carolina found that increased consumption of soft drinks and sweetened fruit drinks alone caused the 80 percent increase in caloric sweetener intake from 1977 to 1996. After controlling for lifestyle-related variables, nutrition research relates increased consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks with weight gain and higher risk of Type II diabetes. This "toxic environment" in schools contradicts the objectives of nutrition education and sends children wrong messages about healthful eating.

Though some of the studies I quoted show correlation and not causation, in the battle against the obesity epidemic, vile marketing practices are undoubtedly an obstacle for policymakers. I challenge Kalamazoo school districts to follow in United Kingdom Education Secretary Alan Johnson's steps by:

1. Banning the junk food and soft drink sales in vending machines and a la carte (allowing the sale of water and >50% natural juices).
2. Replacing energy-dense lunchtime options with healthier alternatives.

The fight doesn't end there. The higher cost of healthy food presents a structural barrier to accessibility for lower socioeconomic strata. Corroborating the Bureau of Labor Statistics finding that income affects a household's food purchases, Adam Drewnowski's research on energy cost reveals that healthier foods like lettuce and fruits cost substantially more than foods with added fat and sugar; the energy cost of cookies or potato chips is 1,200 kilocalories per $1, compared to 250 kilocalories per $1 for fresh carrots. Accordingly, impoverished individuals often can only afford energy-dense, unhealthier foods.

As Michael Pollan of The New York Times skillfully revealed, the skewed (and outrageous) government subsidies the corn industry receives contribute to these startling price disparities. Government-subsidized corn is used to mass-produce high fructose corn syrup (the principal sweetener in soft drinks) and animal
feed at cheap prices. This abundance of cheap, unhealthy food translates to overeating, increased calorie consumption, and higher obesity rates, especially among the underprivileged.

The belief that personal choice causes obesity is nothing short of insular; the toxic environment is the real culprit. The government must enact drastic federal policy changes by reversing its agricultural subsidy policies, subsidizing healthy foods instead, and levying a tax on unhealthy foods. Strict regulations on food advertising must be enforced, and aggressive community nutrition education is a central component of this battle.

The mere suggestion of a food tax may anger you. But, from the perspective of a public health advocate, policies and practices that have made 127 million adults overweight, 60 million obese and 9 million severely obese justify depicting unhealthy food to be no better than tobacco.

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