



## The obesity epidemic revisited: Where is the starting point?

This editorial is influenced by a letter to the editor received from one of the readers of the SA Family Practice journal. The colleague titled his letter: “Where have all the children gone?” My first reaction was to ask the question: “Was there a natural disaster that wiped out children somewhere in the world that I was not aware of?” Reading through the letter, it became clear that he was responding to the Jan/Feb 2013 editorial in which I painted a grim picture of the obesity epidemic globally and locally in South Africa. I decided to publish the letter below and then respond afterwards. So sit back and enjoy the content of the letter and my response.

### “Where have all the children gone?”

The song written by Pete Seeger asks: “Where have all the flowers gone?” My reply is: Forget the *flowers*, where have all the *children* gone? Another school holiday (Easter) has come and gone. As I drive past neighbourhood parks, I am astounded how devoid they are of school children. It was not too long ago when parks were filled with kids playing games of soccer, cricket, touch rugby and hockey. *Where have all the children gone?* As I cycle down our roads, an eerie silence prevails: no street games of cricket or tennis. No windows being hit by soccer balls, no daring kids practising bicycle tricks. *Where have all the children gone?* I park my car at the community shopping centre where I practise and I am hit by a wave of inactivity in the parking lot. Until recently, I had to dodge armies of kids on skate boards, J-boards and all forms of roller blades and scooters. *Where have all the children gone?*

Unfortunately we as family doctors know the answer to this rhetorical question: schoolchildren are not playing outside any longer. They are sitting moronically in front of TV screens, Blackberries, PSPs and other forms of electronic gadgets. All the while, we are confronted increasingly with the resultant problems of obesity-related illnesses. Parents and teachers pressure us to prescribe Ritalin® for children who are unable to concentrate in a classroom, but can focus robotically for hours on some electronic entertainment. My appeal to my colleagues is firstly, to set the example in our communities by bringing up our children on a healthy diet of outside activity. Secondly, we must never give up in our efforts to inspire children (and their parents) to engage in healthy exercise. Otherwise we will wake up one day and find that healthy *childhood* has forever gone. *Dr. Ronald Kapp (Family Physician: Goodwood and Department of Family Medicine: University of Stellenbosch)*

The reader referred to the prevention of childhood obesity from the view point of promoting a “healthy diet and exercise”. What is definitely worrying is that obese children end up as obese adolescents and adults with the various problems associated with

the condition such as cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis etc to mention a few. So in terms of ‘where we should start’ in tackling the obesity epidemic - parents, teachers and family practitioners should focus on opportunistic health promotion for our children, that is, healthy diet and exercise. Let me highlight some data on childhood obesity:

- In the USA, childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and tripled in adolescents in the past 30 years.<sup>1</sup>
- Children and adolescents who are obese are at greater risk for bone and joint problems, sleep apnea, and social and psychological problems such as stigmatization and poor self-esteem.<sup>2,3</sup>
- In South Africa, it is estimated that 1 in 5 children is either overweight or obese, with 20% of children under the age of six being overweight.<sup>4</sup>

If we want to win the battle on obesity, we should start with our children. Obesity in this age group is mainly due to poor diet and lack of exercise. At the risk of being attacked by the fast food industry, this is one sector that should be approached to come on board in providing healthy meals to our children, and as parents and family practitioners we should encourage our children to engage in daily exercise and sporting activities (not video games). They should get back on the streets, parks and fields, burn the fat and become fit. If we collectively work on this, we will be fulfilling the Obesity Policy Action (OPA) framework ‘midstream’ policies which try to alter individuals’ behaviour to prevent obesity.<sup>5</sup> We obviously know the starting point. But do we have the collectively will to start doing something to control childhood obesity in our society? When next as a parent you stop at a fast food outlet, think of the damage you are contributing to the health of our future leaders. Let us collectively prevent childhood obesity. It is possible – Yes we can!

**Prof Gboyega A Ogunbanjo**

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