

Childhood obesity a national crisis

By Jim Nowlan

The last time I was in China, I saw but one overweight child among hundreds of children in a park near Shanghai—and the boy was so abnormal that adults were pointing at him. In the U.S., he would have been considered chunky but certainly not unusual. When I return to O'Hare on overseas flights, whether from Rome or Shanghai, I am struck each time as I traverse the airport concourses by how BIG we Americans are, and I don't mean how tall.

The billions of pounds of excess weight we collectively carry around have to be hurting our productivity, competitiveness and certainly our health care costs. But what can we do about it, and does government have a role to play in combating the problem?

My father and grandfather were “prosperously plump.” A hundred years ago plumpness was apparently a sign that one had done well and could eat to one's heart content. Today, in contrast, obesity rates are higher among the poor than among the well-off, for whom slenderness is a sign of being “with it.” So weight is somewhat of a cultural phenomenon, and can generally be controlled, even though it may be tough to do.

Weight has to do with genetic, behavioral and environmental factors, I'm told. Some of us have genes which predispose us to excessive weight. Others simply eat too much and exercise too little, while yet others, especially the poor, live in “food desert” neighborhoods, absent any supermarkets with fresh fruits and vegetables.

The problem is expanding, if you'll excuse the pun, among children, at alarming rates. In 1980 6 percent of children and adolescents 2-19 were obese, but by 2008 the figure was 20 percent, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta. This represents a tripling in just a generation! (The figures for adults were even higher, said the agency, noting that 28.1 percent of those in Kankakee County were obese [27 percent in LaSalle; 26.9 in Rock Island], which was about the national norm.)

If nearly all of us were thin, as in some upscale neighborhoods, then peer pressure would induce us to be thin as well. But with so many of us overweight or obese, we tend to think it is okay, almost normal. Tragic.

But what can be done about it? We can't pass a law declaring that everyone be slim, nor should we if we could. Yet we can't let the problem fester, or we'll all look like beach balls in another generation, and fitter societies will pass us by.

If answers and strategies there are, they probably lie in a combination of personal and community action combined with governmental encouragement, if not sanctions.

I think Michele Obama is right to have taken on the issue of childhood obesity. Communities need to take up the call for more physical activity and balanced nutrition as well.

Arkansas has been among the heaviest states in the nation. Appalled, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee several years ago became a champion for healthy lifestyles, himself losing 100 pounds in the process. Arkansas legislators implemented a public school body mass index (BMI) screening program, which sent letters home to parents with the results. The state also induced schools to reduce access to soft drink machines and prohibit sales of junk food.

Apparently the efforts have born no weight (excuse me again), that is, they have not had a measurable effect yet. Should governments be involved at all in encouraging healthy habits?

The Pew Center for the Press and the People took a survey (mentioned in an earlier column) and asked if government had a role in reducing obesity among children. Staunch conservatives and libertarians were strongly against a government role, while Democratic voter groups were strongly for such.

Of course, the type of role would undoubtedly make a difference in attitudes toward obesity. I can't imagine that education and promotion of healthy life styles would be opposed. But maybe insurance policy-like sanctions such as higher premiums for smokers and the overweight would be. For example, should the overweight, and smokers as well, who are on the federal-state government Medicaid Program for the low income be required to make co-pays for health services where there are none now? This has been proposed in California, I think it is.

Efforts have to be made to reduce obesity, especially among children, for whom as adults it will be almost impossible to change habits. Let us take up the cause at home, in our communities and even among our governments.