

Global Syndemic: Obesity, Malnutrition and Climate Change

Obesity has been on the agenda now for some time. The Lancet series on obesity in 2011 and 2015 highlighted the scientific knowledge of origin, economic and health burden, the need for systems approaches, and consequences of business as usual. Little has changed since then and the problem continues to engulf larger and larger populations, both in rich and poor countries. Low and middle income countries are experiencing effects of overweight and obesity in addition to unacceptable undernutrition among its under-5s. More recently the Lancet Commission Report by Boyd et al brings several global phenomena into focus, describing the problem as Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition and Climate Change.^[1] Effects of obesity is further recognised by rising cancer incidence in younger adults.^[2]

Nutrition is emerging as a fundamental factor influencing health. Whilst there is individual ability to deal with the problem, the far greater impact is from the food industry and the way food is marketed, which controls what we eat and how we live our lives. Consequences of business as usual must change quickly if we have to save humanity from malnutrition epidemic. Multinationals and international health organisation experts are working on strategies and policies to address the issue.^[3] and hope their efforts will bear fruit.^[4]

Meantime, a lot can be done by disseminating that there is an urgent problem which required everyone's effort. Public demand works. We know that cigarette smoking started to decline only when non-smokers demanded public places to be free of smoke.

Local Governments, especially in low and middle income countries (LMICs), need to emphasise the need for preventive health through all health facilities. Two important activities are growth monitoring for Under-5s and health education through all primary health centres and maternal and child Health clinics. The service should aim at whole population coverage, preferably through involvement of the communities they work for. (see Growth monitoring and Primary Health Care under Old Items)

Primary Health Care is the first stop for anyone seeking help for illness and related issues. Doctors, nurses and other health workers have a unique opportunity and if everyone made it a point to give one health message every day during contacts, it will be a game changer. We need to talk about what we eat and how it affects us, and taking the responsibility of our own health, e.g. avoiding sugar loaded beverages, processed and junk food and indulging in daily exercise, is the first step to healthy living. In LMICs the problem of under nutrition among Under-5s needs to be addressed through locally produced foods, enriching staple food with peanuts (or other local legumes) and eggs. Importance of exclusive breast feeding up to 6 months and quality, quantity and frequency of food given to children 6-26 month olds is the key to reduce the state of wasting and underweight. Communities need to be aware of the fact that improved nutritional status of children reduces the illness rates and enhances the learning capabilities later in schools.

Schools are meant to educate children and prepare them for a healthy and successful future as adults. Our schools generally make children literate and numerate but not informed and aware. They know little about their own bodies and how they function. Shouldn't we be teaching them about the dangers of junk food and of obesity and advantages of exercise? (see Health Education in Schools under Primary Health Care and Old Items.)

In the fight for Global Syndemic, it is important that every one of us chips in.

References:

[1] Boyd A Swinburn et al. The Lancet Commission report. Lancet.com Vol. 393 2019 p791-846.

[2] [Marina and Birmann](#). Rising cancer incidence in younger adults. Lancet Public Health February 4, 2019

[3] [Rachel Nugent](#). Rethinking systems to reverse the global syndemic. Lancet. Vol.393 2019 p726-728.

[4] [Sabine Kleinert & Richard Horton](#). Obesity needs to be put into a much wider context. Lancet. Vol. 393 2019. p724-725.