Cultural Views on Obesity

Today, even countries suffering from economic hardship are affected by the surging obesity rates. In the United States, the rate of obesity has increased nearly 40% since the early 1990s. Even countries traditionally thought of as relatively "thin" have seen significant increases in obesity rates (Lawler 2009:288). These articles indicate some of the reasons behind global obesity and how cultural views on obesity affect this issue. The majority of the articles I'm not sure which articles you are discussing state complications that can arise due to obesity (refer to Health Concerns Related to Obesity and Prevention of Obesity). However, despite the fact that the effects of obesity are common knowledge, studies of various cultural backgrounds explain the many factors that contribute to the increasing global rates.

A study of children of Mexican descent showed that about 32.6% of Mexican children occupying the U.S. are overweight and about 19.2% are obese (Gallagher 2010:16). The parents observed in this study were feeding their children unhealthy foods, such as those from cans and fast food restaurants, due to price and convenience (Gallagher 2010:20). Apart from financial reasons, being overweight is preferred in certain cultures. For example, a study in South African communities showed a strong correlation between household income and obesity (Candib 2007:551). Obesity and size often represent power, wealth, and high social status. Rather than writing off obesity as an effect of cultural values, Japan's government has taken the issue into their own hands. The Japanese government created the "Metabo Legislation". The legislation is aimed at reducing medical costs and the rate of metabolic syndrome, a form of obesity caused by accumulation of visceral fat, high blood sugar levels, and high blood pressure (Lawler 2009:291). As of April, 7, 2008, the government required an annual screening of the population, followed by a fine imposed on anyone who refused to participate or work towards lowering the metabolic syndrome rate. Wow! Unimaginable in the US I suspect.

Mehta's (2010) article was on a study of the effects of the media on young consumers. The article analyzes the methods used by the media to target consumers of various age groups. The majority of the highly advertised foods are deemed unhealthy and are characterized as "non-core foods to be eaten sparingly" (Mehta 2010:49). This high level of advertisement sends the message that these unhealthy foods are desirable and essential, therefore contributing to society's obesogenic environment. This study implies that the media is partly at fault for the present obesity rates in our society. Over exaggerated positive advertisements makes consumption of these products almost mainstream.

Various regions of the world have different responses to the issue of obesity. Some cultures view obesity as necessary and attractive while some are taking drastic measures in an attempt to promote a healthy lifestyle. Although some of these drastic changes (such as the one implemented in Japan) seem a bit invasive and controversial, policy makers are debating whether it is effective and even whether or not such a policy should be adopted in the United States. According to the article written by Gallagher, a culture sensitive approach should be implemented in order to tackle the issue of global obesity.

Figure 6: Depending on cultural backgrounds, weight gain might be desired or avoided. (http://www.inkcinct.com.au Fig. 6)