Brown (1991) Culture and the evolution of obesity

Brown, Peter


(I have handed you a hard copy of the journal)

How long has the problem of obesity existed throughout the world? The article “Culture and The Evolution of Obesity” by Peter Brown (1991) describes obesity in two different ways: in reference to genetic evolution and human culture. In Here I will review the evolution of obesity through the genetic changes of the human body and the way culture and environment influences obesity.

Humans are known for changing and adapting to the environment around them. According to Brown (1991:34) “20 million Americans are hungry and poorly nourished largely because they lack sufficient money.” Our body contains fat cells that store fat for energy which are difficult to eliminate. Throughout history our ancestors had to deal with food shortages, Brown tells us, “Since food shortages were ubiquitous for humans under natural conditions, selection favored individuals who could effectively store calories in times of surplus.” (Brown 1991:41) In response to these shortages humans needed to developed stronger fat cells. The storage of fat cells is also beneficial for reproduction purposes, Brown says: “Selection has favored the production of peripheral body fat in females, whose reproductive fitness depends on their ability to withstand the nutritional demands of pregnancy and lactation.”(Brown 1991: 42) According to Brown, “Women have more subcutaneous fat as measured by skin fold thickness in 16 of 17 sites,” (Brown 1991: 36). Over time through history humans developed genes to store fat in order to keep the human race from going extinct. I found it very interesting that food scarcity would result in our body adapting and producing stronger fat cells to store energy.

Culture and society also influence obesity. For example, every society has a perception of what the body should look like. Brown states, “In developing countries, there is a strong and consistent positive association between social class and obesity for men, women, and children; correspondingly, there is an inverse correlation between social class and protein-calorie malnutrition.” (Brown 1991:39). In most cultures, “fatness is symbolically linked to psychological dimensions, such as self-worth and sexuality.” (Brown 1991:46). Brown describes to us, “A fat women, symbolically, is well taken care of, and in turn takes good care of her children.” (Brown 1991:47) In many countries women are looked at as maternal beings and that their most important purpose is to give birth. In the United States women are looked at as more than just “mothers” which explains why in the United States being “thin” is the ideal body type. I found it interesting when a sociological interviewer was asked by obese black women from Atlanta, Georgia, “Don't you know how hard it is to keep this weight on?” (Brown 1991: 47) For these women being obese gave them “respect and reduced chances of being bothered by young ‘toughs’ in the neighborhood.” (Brown 1991: 47) Obesity is connected to the social impact your culture and society has on you.

The evolution of obesity is shown through the genetic evolution of the human body and the way a human's cultural environment influences obesity. Genetically through history the human body adapted to its environment and produced stronger fat cells that could last through seasons of food scarcity. The cultural and social environment influences obesity by society telling people the way they should look.