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Author: South Africa

Obesity is a relatively recent issue given the long history of our modern developed society, and is a luxury that only comes from a general abundance of low cost foodstuffs. Indeed the scale of its impact on life expectancy, general health and quality of life has only become evident since the turn of the century.

In the case of South Africa, obesity is a large and controversial problem as a result of our particular characteristics compared to most other countries. South Africa forms part of the emerging nations, but despite our economic situation being more favorable than many comparable countries, we remain far from an optimum economic state. As a result, 53,8% of our total population (source: "World Development Indicators") remains under the poverty line. This means that a large number of individuals suffer malnutrition or are exposed to an inadequate diet. Famine, in fact, is often present in our country and it is thus difficult for the government to put a regulation on the kinds of foods that should or shouldn't be consumed when many are struggling to get sufficient nutrition and may even be dying from hunger.

To make matters worse, for much of our population the lowest cost foods are the most harmful for their wellbeing as they are generally high in fats and sugars, both directly linked to obesity. These represent low cost, low quality, but high calorie diets, and appeal directly to our swelling, youthful urban population.

One option would be to increase the cost of such low quality foods in order to curtail their consumption. However taxing the basic necessities of the poorest is an unacceptable option as they are clearly the least able to withstand such financial pressure given their economic situation, also one should ask oneself which foods should or shouldn't be affected by this taxation? Obviously the types of foods directly linked with obesity must be discouraged, but if these laws affect national enterprises the consequences could be even graver for the poor working in such businesses. As a result, such taxation may harm our young and struggling economy.

Another issue with obesity in our country is its direct impact on other related illnesses, such as cardiovascular disease. As a developing nation our healthcare system is still improving, but is underfunded and understaffed. As a consequence the increase in number of patients with such diseases is a luxury we cannot afford.

One of the many reasons for the increasing percentage of obese people is the sudden change of lifestyle that has occurred over the past decades in our country. In our not so distant past our population was mainly rural, meaning that physical activity was part of our daily lives, however in our modern society the increasingly sedentary lifestyle results in around 50% of the population no longer partaking in regular exercise sufficient to maintain their general health.

In addition to the lack of physical exercise, the attitude of the general population towards this illness is either that they do not care or that it is a genetic condition and is out of their hands. To combat this negative attitude one option would be to promote an advertising campaign to raise awareness of this issue, the causes, consequences and corrections to lifestyle required.

Another contributing factor in the growing obesity issue particular to South Africa is the current fashion for women being seen as more attractive if overweight rather than underweight. This could well be the reason for 6/10 women being overweight and 3/10 obese. This compared to 4/10 of men being overweight and 1/10 obese.

In conclusion, South Africa would clearly wish to act to reduce obesity, but in the context of the multitude of issues impacting our country, there will be great difficulty in taking meaningful measures.