



Rich Diet Is Child Neglect and Responsible People Need to Act

In England, obesity has been a factor in at least 20 child protection cases in the last year.¹ The British Medical Association (BMA) just rejected a call for the parents of young obese children, under 12, to be charged with neglect.² At this meeting held in Torquay, England on June 25 to 29, 2007, a representative said, "If parents will not or cannot take responsibility to provide the right diet and encourage exercise for their children after engaging with doctors and dietitians, we believe that this is a form of child neglect. If the child's health is at risk they should be removed from their parents for their own protection." In the end, representatives of the British Medical Association came to the conclusion that referring parents to child protection agencies would "do more harm than good."

In ways much more progressive than seen in the US and most other sophisticated countries, representatives at this meeting voted by a large majority to reinforce the BMA's policy calling for a ban on the advertising of unhealthy food to children and for less salt, sugar, and hydrogenated fats to be added to prepared foods.

How Much Does Obesity Hurt?

Diet and child neglect have been topical news. In May of 2007, vegan parents in Georgia, USA were given a mandatory life prison sentence after their 6-week-old son, Crown Shakur, died of malnutrition from a diet of apple juice and soy milk. Considering the worldwide suffering of children from starvation, the severity of this verdict seems somewhat disingenuous. Daily images of Africa's starving children evoke sympathy and we want to and should take action. Ironically, we fail to see equal pain and suffering of the children living right under our own roofs.



Many of you do not have to imagine the pain of obesity—you have lived the experience. The humiliation and discrimination of buying from the plus size racks and the remarks from high school classmates are still seared into your memories. Even though obesity is the most commonly discussed harm caused by unhealthy eating, it is not the only one, and not necessarily the most painful one. The noticeable facial sores from acne and the hidden worry when bowel movements come as infrequently as once a week cause intense hurting—and they are due to diet too.

Does Intention Matter?

I believe few parents would intentionally cause their children harm. Many do not even recognize there is a problem within their families. Consider the findings of this *Consumers Reports* survey, "Only 4 percent of survey respondents described their children as being 20 percent or more above their ideal weight or obese. But *Consumer Reports* found that 19 percent of those children fell in that category."³ Epidemic obesity and sickness are unseen because they are so common and so close to us that they are considered "normal" conditions.

Right now the perpetrators are frequently the "nicest parents." Teachers, bankers, ministers, doctors, and police feed the Western diet to their children—and most think that the meat and cheese are good for their children's muscles and bones, and the junk is inconsequential. Genetics, emotional stress, viruses and/or unknown causes are blamed for their children's health problems. Ignorance of the real consequences of the meals children consume is the primary reason that this widespread problem con-

Scale of Suffering and Pain

(100 points being the most painful. Feel welcome to change the numbered scores—these values come from my experiences and imagination)

Starving to near death	100
Dying of leukemia	100
Sexual abuse by an adult	90
Physical abuse from a parent	88
Verbal abuse from a parent	81
Testicular cancer with chemotherapy	78
Obesity during high school	74
Inflamed cystic acne	68
Insulin shots for type-2 diabetes	66
Constipation with BM every 10 to 15 days	65
Anal fissures and/or bleeding hemorrhoids	59
Precocious puberty (age 8)	56
Recurrent abdominal pains	53
4 days of painful menses each month	52
Recurrent sore throats and tonsillitis	51
Daily headaches	48
Moderately overweight	46
Offensive body odor	44
Very oily skin	41
Being hungry every day	40
Typical teenage pimples	37
Chronic fatigue	28
Reduced athletic performance	21
Mild irritable bowels (IBS)	15

*These conditions that involve diet—except for starvation—are all known to be caused or suspected of being caused by the Western diet. (Sexual, physical and verbal abuse are, of course, not from diet.)

tinues. Educated people with some financial means would be expected to take remedial actions after learning the truth about how the Western diet hurts their children. On the other hand, many families are trapped in poverty, preventing them from making the right choices even after they know the truth and want to do otherwise. (They receive free dairy and meat products from government subsidy programs. But the McDougall diet is very inexpensive, but they do not know this fact.)

Should unintentional harm be excused? Consider the parents of Crown Shakur. They did not intend for their baby to die, but they are still going to prison. The pain and suffering for the children is real, regardless of whether or not the cause is deliberate.

Change Must Begin Somewhere

Until the true nature of this beast is uncovered nothing will change. Responsible people must lead and medical doctors are the logical first step. These trained professionals witness the direct effects of the Western diet all day long in their offices and have opportunities to counsel parents and children. Innovative medical education for doctors is

a prerequisite for change, since most doctors are shamefully unaware. State licensing boards could mandate classes for re-licensing, just like they now have classes in pain management, HIV and elderly care. Like the laws that now require a medical doctor to report physical abuse of a child to the proper authorities, laws may be required in order to fix dietary abuses.

Involvement of the community with their schools can result in immediate improvements in health education and the lunch programs. Big food businesses must be banned from advertising unhealthy foods to our children—no honest person could rationalize that the pain and suffering of even one child from

any one of the conditions in the above box are worth "free enterprise." Damaging messages can soon be replaced by public service announcements, documentaries and traveling speakers, spreading the truth about the causes, consequences, and cures of the diseases of over-nutrition that plagues our children. This ubiquitous source of pain and suffering, even though out of sight or mind, can no longer be tolerated, because child neglect and child abuse produce effects that last a lifetime for that person and spreads a cancer in any society that turns its back on its children.

References:

- 1) Consumers Report: http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/babies-kids/parents-cant-always-tell-if-their-kids-are-overweight-survey-finds-7-07/overview/0707_parents-cant-always-tell-if-their-kids-are-overweight_ov.htm?resultPageIndex=1&resultIndex=2&searchTerm=obesity
- 2) Kmietowicz AC. BMA rejects call for parents of obese children to be charged with neglect. BMJ. 2007 Jun 30; 334(7608): 1343.
- 3) http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/babies-kids/parents-cant-always-tell-if-their-kids-are-overweight-survey-finds-7-07/overview/0707_parents-cant-always-tell-if-their-kids-are-overweight_ov.htm?resultPageIndex=1&resultIndex=3&searchTerm=childhood%20obesity