

Case 13 ♦ Anti-Obesity Ads

In Georgia 40% of children are obese, but as few as 25% of parents consider this a problem.¹ In a move that has provoked some controversy, a pediatric hospital in Atlanta has decided to counteract parents' denial with an advertising campaign. Fashioned after shocking and often gruesome anti-methamphetamine campaigns, the Georgia ads show depressed-looking overweight kids, with messages such as "It's hard to be a little girl if you're not," or "Fat prevention begins at home and the buffet line."



A spokesperson for the ad campaign argues that the harshness of these ads will get people's attention. Some research shows that "in the right conditions, and with appropriate support, stigma may present...sufficient triggers" to jump-start weight loss.² Maya, one of the girls who participated in the campaign, echoes this sentiment: "It is very provocative and makes people uncomfortable, but it's when people are uncomfortable that change comes."³

However, public health scholars have questioned the effectiveness of a campaign that further stigmatizes a vulnerable population: obese children are frequently bullied in school due to their weight and overweight adults are the subject of discrimination.⁴ A recent study showed that more than half of medical students polled had a significant anti-fat bias,⁵ while another study found that 24% of nurses surveyed felt repulsion towards their obese patients. Moreover,

¹ Emanuella Grinberg, "Georgia's Child Obesity Ads Aim to Create Movement out of Controversy, CNN Health, February 7, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/07/health/atlanta-child-obesity-ads>

² Jane Ogden and Cecelia Clementi, "The Experience of Being Obese and the Many Consequences of Stigma," *Journal of Obesity*, 2010.

³ Meghan Keneally, "'Mom, Why Am I Fat?': Controversy over Shock Anti-Obesity Ads Featuring Overweight Children," *Mail Online*, January 2, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2081328/Weighty-debate-anti-obesity-ads-featuring-fat-kids-causes-criticism-health-advocates-shock-tactics.html>

⁴ Rebecca Pulh and Chelsea Heuer, "Obesity Stigma: Important Considerations for Public Health," *Journal Information*, 2010, 100(6).

⁵ Stephen Davis, et al., "Are Medical Students Aware of Their Anti-obesity Bias?" *Acad Med*, 2013, 88.

compared to their non-overweight counterparts, overweight individuals are less likely to get hired, receive promotions or raises, and gain acceptance into college or graduate school.⁶ Being overweight is often correlated with a host of medical conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and osteoarthritis. This increased morbidity has been estimated to add \$168 billion to the cost of health care in the U.S.⁷ However, a recent Canadian study⁸ has challenged our commonly-held assumptions about the link between health, obesity and mortality, showing that obese people can be healthy (i.e., can have normal blood pressure and blood lipid levels), and that healthy obese individuals “live as long as those of ‘normal’ weight, and, in fact, are less likely to die of cardiovascular causes.”⁹

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⁶ Rebecca Puhl and Kelly Brownell, "Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity." *Obesity Research*, 2011, 9(12): 788-805; Lauren Ingeno, "Fat- Shaming in Academe," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 4, 2013, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/06/04/outrage-over-professors-twitter-post-obese-students>

⁷ John Cawley and Chad Meyerhoefer, "The Medical Care Costs of Obesity: An Instrumental Variables Approach," *Journal of Health Economics*, 2012, 31(1): 219-230.

⁸ Jennifer Kuk, et al. "Edmonton Obesity Staging System: Association with Weight History and Mortality Risk," *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, 2011, 36(4): 570-576.

⁹ Sharon Kirkey, "Heavy But Healthy? New Formula Slims Down Definition of Dangerously Obese," *Postmedia News*, August 16, 2011, <http://www.canada.com/health/Heavy+healthy+formula+slims+down+definition+dangerously+obese/5257089/story.html>