

The Illinois Report 2009

Chapter 8: Obesity: Causes, Consequences and Public Policy Solutions

Transcript of video interview with author Robert Kaestner

“Obesity has grown dramatically over the last 30 years, tripled in terms of its prevalence for children, more than doubled for adults, and the real consequences are that it’s very harmful to people’s health. So, as obesity has grown, so have the health problems and the cost of health care associated with that problem. And combined with just general rise in health care cost, it forms kind of a double whammy.

“The first thing that I think is overlooked is that a lot of obesity is voluntary, in the sense that people know that Big Macs are unhealthy, know that soda is high calorie, but they do it anyway because it gives them a lot of enjoyment, I personally myself love Big Macs, so, I mean, people enjoy consuming these high caloric foods, they taste good, they satiate you, and they do it voluntarily.

“Now, the reason government should be involved is because the government has taken a lot of policies, for instance agricultural subsidies, urban design, zoning issues, that have helped influence people’s decisions about food and exercise, which has exacerbated the problem of obesity. So in order to undo some of those problems, the government needs to take steps to reduce obesity directly.

“Policies to do that are - there’s not a lot of great on-the-shelf answers to do that. Some people suggest raising taxes on foods, soft drinks, I don’t think that’s going to be very effective because there’s lots of substitutes. Do you tax McDonalds, do you tax pizza joints, do you tax Chinese food, do you tax take-out super markets? So, it’s very hard to implement that. If you tax soda, people start drinking orange juice, very high caloric also - maybe healthier, but still high calories.

“So there’s not a lot of good options. Probably the best one is continued education, both general and specific education to make people more aware of the problem, how they can be healthier and to help them make the right decisions.”