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Regulation May Be the Key to Ending the Obesity Crises

If you were to ask the average American what a preventable cause of death is you would probably get many different responses. Some may suggest acts of war, while others may respond with tobacco, alcohol, and drug use. Many would be unaware that a poor diet is one of the leading causes of preventable death in our country today. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, 34 percent of Americans are obese and another 33 percent are overweight. If the government doesn't answer this call to action, 51% of American adults will be diagnosed as obese by the year 2030 (Healy par. 4).

It is a given in today's society that processed food makes up the lion's share of shelf space in grocery and convenience stores. The fast food giants and food manufacturers are raking in billions of dollars a year from consumers. Their aggressive marketing tactics make them leading contributors to the growing rate of obesity in our nation. An example of this is McDonald's version of the popular breakfast food oatmeal, which is touted as a balanced breakfast alternative. A single serving of plain oatmeal has one gram of sugar, but McDonalds, oatmeal contains over 18 grams, beating out a snickers bar for sugar content (Whitman. 2, 4). The deception of hiding sugar and other additives in healthy foods is alarming and we as a society are rendered powerless to stop it without government intervention. The government has claimed victory over personal behaviors such as alcohol and tobacco use due in part to the social disapproval and medical calamities. Both of these are now in play with the impending plague of obesity facing America.

Being obese certainly has health concerns from the physical standpoint but what can be even more damaging are the mental wounds. Society's attitude toward those that are obese can be traced throughout history. It is well documented in books and art that a well-rounded figure was once looked upon as attractive and desirable by the opposite sex. When food was scarce, good health and financial wealth were signified by the double chin on one's face (Obesity Timeline par.1). As food became plentiful, society generally looked upon the overweight with disdain. With the explosion of social media over the last decade, we are all witness to the humiliation that those who are obese are faced with as pictures and videos are posted to media sites with the intention to mock and ridicule. Stories of fat shaming have been reported that range from employment discrimination to seating on an airplane. Media attention has given rise to obesity becoming the new hot topic of discriminatory practices.

The creation of the obesity epidemic can be linked to modernization. From the 1800's through the early 1900's, food was still thought of as relatively untouched. In books and movies depicting that time in history, fresh and readily available food is shown to be obtained through labor intensive plowing and gathering. Families relied upon mother- nature to provide the sunlight and precipitation needed for their crops to flourish. Hunting was a time honored tradition shared by several generations within a family. With the need for physical exertion to bring dinner to the table, obesity was decades away from fruition. In the article "The Shape We're In," West Virginia University professor Ron Lewis said, "A hundred years ago, life was hard and punishing for most people'; men worked the fields and ranged the hillsides, hunting and trapping. Food was a full-time job." (Long par. 14)

Today modernization has replaced the physical labor of harvesting our food supply. Factories with robotic equipment and teams of scientists are now in control of the automated

production of our food. Through invention and science, Americans now have to move less and are subjected to a sensory overload of products that contain chemicals and additives. Food is more available and convenient than ever. The food industry profits by putting what people like in their product: sugar, salt, fat and plenty of additives. Many of these additives are thought to make processed food as addicting as cocaine. Even though there is science to support this, the marketing slogan from Lay's potato chips sums it up; "Betcha can't eat just one" ("Food Fight" par. 3).

The government should impose regulations on the food industry to tackle the obesity epidemic that is burdening us with sky rocketing health-care costs and may soon become the number one preventable cause of death. Certain regulations should be enforced to protect our society, much like those regulations that the tobacco industry endured in the past. The evidence that the government should regulate the food industry to thwart obesity can be found in the health statistics of the obese, the upswing of child obesity, and the monumental financial costs to care for the increasing numbers of obese Americans. Having the government pass regulations to help prevent obesity may be the only way for us to become a healthier nation.

Society cannot ignore the alarming statistics any longer. Even though obesity is a personal behavior topic, the social disapproval and medical issues are now on the government's radar. The projected continuation of the obesity epidemic in the health care industry is being fueled by the increased risk to the obese of acute and chronic conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and arthritis (Dortch par. 5). Our government has a long history of granting subsidies to junk food manufacturers but we as taxpayers can no longer afford to allow our lawmakers to reward these companies financially when the products they produce contribute to obesity related illnesses an attribute to higher health care costs.

The food industry has continued to push its products onto the most vulnerable, our children. With physical activity being reduced in schools and at home, it is no surprise that 17% of children are overweight or obese (Rappeport and Gelles par. 18). Children are facing grown-up illnesses that include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, depression, Type 2 diabetes, and eating disorders (Churnin par. 2). There are over 100 studies documenting that food marketing geared towards children has played a significant role in the childhood obesity epidemic (Golin par. 2). Fast food restaurants and large food manufacturers are able to spend millions of saved dollars due to government subsidies, to finance the advertising of their products to overworked and exhausted parents looking for a quick way to serve dinner to their families. This often results in meals picked up at the drive thru window or deli counters.

As waistlines continue to grow in all age, gender, and cultural groups, the devastating financial burden will continue to take its toll on Americans' pocketbooks. The increase in obesity related illnesses will only drive up these costs due to loss of productivity and higher insurance premiums. The estimated cost of treating the swelling number of obese for medical conditions such as diabetes and heart disease could reach \$550 billion over the next two decades (Healy par. 2).

The food industry can be viewed as a difficult opponent to regulate. They have been accused of aggressively pushing unhealthy food products on consumers and creating products that are designed by food scientists to get Americans hooked and coming back for more. By creating neurochemical addiction, it is argued that these foods change brain chemistry causing an urge to overeat (Ambinder par. 16). The American Beverage Association is firing back accusing health officials of using graphic images to frighten people about their products by linking them to disease and amputation. They say the campaigns are "stomach-turning" and "misleading

propaganda” (Rappaport and Gelles par. 7). The opposition also brings up the argument of the lack of a precise correlation between its products and the growing burden of cancer, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease and the fact that, unlike tobacco, moderate consumption of food and drink is not only harmless but also necessary (Jack, Lucas and Rappaport par. 15).

Americans are known to fiercely guard their freedom of choice. Many would say that they would rather have the freedom to choose what they eat and chance health consequences, than to have the government regulate. Thomas Jefferson once said, “I predict future happiness for Americans if they can prevent the Government from wasting the labors of the people under the pretense of taking care of them” (Thomas Jefferson Quotes”). Those opposing further intrusion of the government in their personal lives advocate personal responsibility. They argue that we all have the choice to overindulge or to choose to eat sensibly. Their position is that food choice and exercise is also a choice that each individual must make to ensure their own physical and mental health.

Even though we often raise protest to government intervention, many products that are sold to people today face heavy regulations. Cigarette companies can no longer advertise their products on television, or target children. In fact cigarette companies were forced to pay millions of dollars to fund anti-smoking campaigns in order to further educate and protect the people (Levin and Weinstein par. 63). People do have the freedom to choose what they want to do, but when something is so obviously harmful, such as cigarettes, or in this case, our food supply, then something must be done in order to protect the people. Food products do not have to be banned or taken off the shelf, but people need to be just as educated and protected from the dangers of the ingredients in our food as they are from cigarettes. The numbers and statistics do not lie.

Fat has become a menace for Americans therefore, the government should step in and regulate the food industry. Today's obesity epidemic can be related to poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and life's fast pace. When we do slow down, we spend hours sitting in front of the television and computer. Even those who vehemently oppose government regulations cannot argue that obesity has not reached an all-time high in the United States. Junk food and fast food choices have become a big part of the daily diet, while the recommended amount of fresh fruits and vegetables are rarely met. Many believe in personal responsibility for their own food choices and balk at government intervention, but the statistics illustrate a looming healthcare crisis that can be avoided or in some part reduced.

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