
Obesity in the News

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Obesity is big news, but are the important health messages getting through? Catriona Bonfiglioli explains the causes and effects of media coverage of obesity.

Obesity is big news in Australia: newspaper coverage of the subject has exploded in the past decade, especially since 2002. In 2006, more than 1200 stories were published in just five newspapers (Fig. 1).

What makes obesity big news? The answer: scary stories about how obesity is an epidemic that threatens the health of Australians, causes heart disease, diabetes and cancer, and may damage the economy (see box, p.10).

But that's not the whole answer. The NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity has conducted a study of 50 stories about overweight and obesity from television news and current affairs programs to see what makes obesity news (Bonfiglioli C. et al. 2007, www.mja.com.au). We found that news about overweight and obesity focused most often on stories of modern medical miracles such as obesity surgery or a pill to prevent obesity, tales of the unexpected, the latest diet, dieting success stories, as well as alarming stories about how large and dangerous the obesity epidemic is.

Why Do We Care What's in the News?

People watch news to keep up to date, find out what's happening, be entertained and have things to chat about at school and work. But, for health researchers, what's important is how news shapes the way people think about health and how people act when it comes to their health.

There are debates about exactly how the media affects audiences, but health researchers have found some striking examples of media impact. For example, Jane Pirkis and colleagues at the University of Melbourne found that:

- the quantity of suicide news coverage was associated with increased suicide rates;
- US and New Zealand research found that after news reports of the discovery of links between hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and breast cancer and heart disease, many women taking HRT quit; and
- vaccination against measles, mumps and rubella fell by 13.6% in a Welsh community touched by a newspaper campaign claiming the vaccine was risky, but by only 2.4% elsewhere.

Furthermore, a US study found that 58% of adults surveyed said they had changed behaviour after exposure to a media health story.

One of the most dramatic examples involved

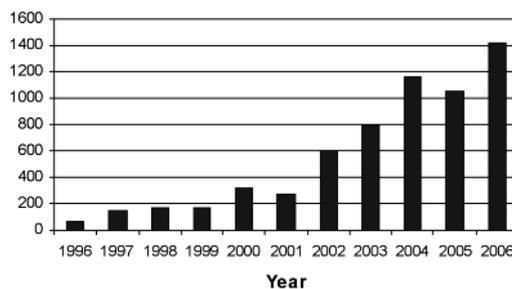


Figure 1. Quantity of coverage of overweight and obesity in five Australian newspapers.

Australian pop diva Kylie Minogue. In 2005, news coverage of breast cancer soared when Kylie was found to have breast cancer. In the weeks after the revelation, data obtained by Simon Chapman and colleagues at the University of Sydney showed that the number of women aged 40–69 booking mammography breast scans doubled.

Many theories underpin research into the news media, but two key ideas are central to our research: agenda setting and framing.

News Sets the Agenda

Because journalists select which issues and events to report on from a wide range of possible stories, news audiences see these issues and events as more important than the sidelined stories. When reporters and editors use their news judgment to decide where to place a story in the paper or a bulletin, these decisions also signal to audiences which stories are most important. This role of conferring importance onto news and events is known as the agenda-setting role of the media and is thought to be a key explanation of how news influences social and political agendas.

News Frames Issues

The news also shapes public understanding by framing issues in particular ways. This happens when news highlights certain aspects of issues, sidelines others and uses metaphors and catchphrases to link news stories to archetypal tales such as David and Goliath. News framing has the effect of defining problems, identifying causes and apportioning blame, and thereby promotes particular solutions.

For example, news reports that focus on the criminality of using illicit drugs effectively promote punishment as the solution to the

drugs problem. Focusing on illicit drug users as people with an addiction points to healthcare solutions. Likewise, news coverage that highlights humanity’s contribution to global warming promotes reduced carbon emissions, while stories emphasising the view that human activity makes no difference to global temperatures or weather promotes a “business as usual” approach.

News media is mainly a commercial industry, not a public health information service. Reporters have to write compelling news stories that will engage readers, viewers and listeners. This means journalists are looking for stories that affect a lot of people, involve conflict, are trendy or local, feature a celebrity or prominent

person, are quirky or have human interest. So what does the news have to say about blame and responsibility in relation to obesity?

... our research suggests that professional practices in journalism create patterns of coverage that downplay some of the important issues in obesity.

Causes, Blame and Responsibility

The main cause of the obesity epidemic is widely believed to be individuals eating and drinking too much and moving too little. This traditional focus on individual gluttony and sloth has commonsense appeal – everyone knows that if you eat too much and move too little you put on weight. However, it downplays the important role that the physical and social environment play in driving or constraining the choices we make each day about how much to eat and drink and how active to be (Fig. 2). Environmental drivers of obesity include a lack of safe footpaths for walking to school or work, a proliferation of affordable high-fat, high-sugar

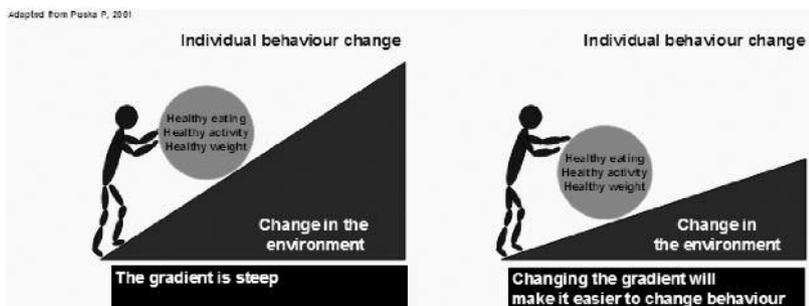


Figure 2. Changing the environment makes individual change easier.

Source: King L, Hector DJ. Building solutions for preventing childhood obesity: Overview module. NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity, 2007.

foods, poor access to tasty, healthy foods, car dependency and a lack of bike lanes for people who cycle to work or school.

In our study of television news, we determined the main message each story sent about who was responsible for overweight and obesity. In two-thirds of the 50 stories, the main message was that individuals were personally responsible for their weight. Parents were the group held most responsible in 12% of items, industry in 8% and society in 6%. This is consistent with US studies of newspaper coverage, which found that two-thirds of articles held individuals responsible. So, although not every story pointed the finger at individuals, the overall pattern sends a strong message that people with a weight problem have only themselves to blame and should take personal action to lose weight.

Personal responsibility is a powerful element in community thinking, and is applied to many other issues. Our study shows how Australian television news and current affairs coverage of obesity reflects and reinforces this way of thinking. Too much emphasis on personal responsibility of overweight people may contribute to stigmatisation of people with weight problems, allow healthy-weight individuals with unhealthy lifestyles to think they are not affected and have no need to change their habits, and work against efforts to slow the obesity epidemic at a population level. Blaming overweight people does not appear to be slowing the epidemic.

There is an alternative. Public health research has identified many social, cultural and environmental factors that influence over-

weight and obesity. For example, people whose suburb has no supermarket eat less fruit and vegetables; the more people drive, the greater their chance of being overweight; and attractive parks increase walking. These findings underpin calls for new solutions based on reducing the obesogenic nature of modern life, such as improving food quality, boosting access to fresh fruit and vegetables, reducing dependence on cars and improving urban planning and many others (see www.coo.health.usyd.edu.au/pdf/2005_creating_healthy_environments.pdf).

When we looked at the solutions presented in our sample, we found they were dominated by calls for better nutrition and more exercise. Very few solutions found in our sample were based on structural interventions such as curbing the marketing of unhealthy food and drink to children, education, improving the quality of school food, better urban design and planning, better policies or better food labelling. Studies of US newspapers show similar patterns: many of the US articles evoked structural or environmental causes, but most fell back on individual behavioural change when it came to discussing solutions.

There has been some outstanding news coverage in Australia recently of the importance of the social, physical and cultural environment to obesity. Some important environmental influences on obesity are being discussed in the news media, most notably the debate about whether there should be greater curbs on marketing of high-fat, high-sugar foods and drinks to children. Also featured are efforts by companies such as McDonalds and

Environmental Drivers of Obesity

- Car dependency – every extra hour in a car boosts obesity by 6%
- Food apartheid – areas with supermarkets have 20% less obesity
- City planning – suburbs without jobs, schools or recreational facilities promote car use
- Obvious lifts and hidden stairs – friendly, open stairs promote stair climbing
- Suburb design – curvy, blocked-off streets discourage walking
- Portion size – the bigger the portion the more you eat and drink
- Safety and beauty – safe, attractive parks promote healthy activity and active transport
- Fast food saturation – easy access to fast food promotes a fatty diet
- Public transport – accessible public transport encourages walking
- Advertising – advertisements promoting high-fat, high-sugar foods target kids

See www.coo.health.usyd.edu.au/pdf/2005_creating_healthy_environments.pdf

Subway to provide healthy or at least healthier choices to their customers. However, our systematic study suggests that this kind of reporting is in the minority.

We also examined the voices heard in the 50 television segments suggesting solutions to obesity. We found that the main voices were those of people with a weight problem, obesity and other experts, and journalists. Very few politicians, government spokespeople, industry spokespeople, lobby groups or celebrities were featured.

The choice of voices influences the kind of news produced: if industry and government are not often interviewed, their role in preventing or solving obesity is less likely to be investigated. Patterns of reporting that focus blame on people with a weight problem reinforce solutions based on educating individuals to change their behaviour, and may undermine population approaches to addressing obesity that work to make healthy choices easier for everyone.

“The obesity epidemic cannot be prevented by individual action alone and demands a societal approach” (Butland B. *et al.* UK Government Office for Science’s Tackling Obesities: Future Choices Report, 18 October 2007, <http://s3.amazonaws.com/foresight/20.pdf>).

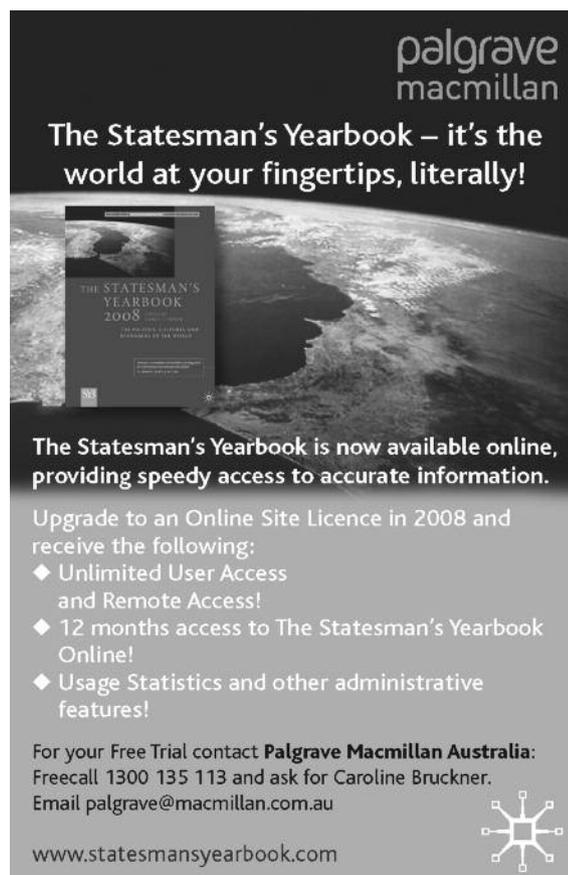
It is true that every day each one of us makes decisions about what to eat and drink and how active to be. However, research shows that the increasingly obesogenic environment created by modern life makes it hard for many people to resist overweight and obesity, and studies of the rise of obesity show the impact of these social and environmental pressures. In 2003, almost 60% of men and 39% of women in Australia were overweight or obese and one-quarter of boys and 23% of girls were overweight or obese (www.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2006/spans/index.html). Obesity is predicted to rise, with findings by Margaret Allman-Farinelli and colleagues at the University of Sydney suggesting that younger people are getting fatter faster than older generations (http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/pubs/2006/spans/wot_women.pdf).

Diet or Exercise?

One of the recent debates in the media is whether food or sedentary lifestyles are more

important in causing overweight and obesity. One side blames junk food and drink; the other blames too much television and not enough sport. The truth is that being overweight is the result of an ongoing imbalance between how much we eat and drink and how much we get to move around, with genes increasing the risk for some. Getting active improves health no matter whether you lose weight or not, but if there are too many extra kilojoules in your food and drink it will be hard to exercise enough to burn off all the extra energy. As little as one soft drink per day can lead to creeping weight gain.

However, our study suggests that we are much more obsessed with greed than sloth: 77% of TV news items portrayed poor nutrition as the main cause of obesity, while only 6% blamed inactivity. Eight per cent saw both causes as responsible, while 14% held neither to blame. Experts in the field see both good nutrition and active living as crucial to the health of all Australians. Blaming food for obesity may mean people fail to recognise the importance of physical inactivity in causing



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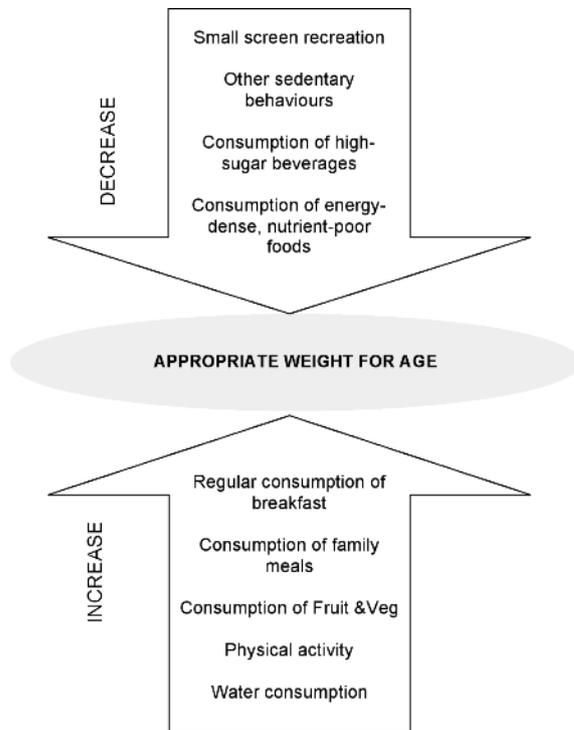


Figure 3. Ways to move towards a healthy weight for age.
Adapted with permission from an unpublished illustration by P. Puska, 2001

obesity and key diseases including heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

Other research suggests that there is plenty of room for improvement in both departments: Maree Scully and colleagues at the Cancer Council Victoria found that only one in five school students consume an adequate amount of vegetables, less than 40% usually ate the daily recommended serves of fruit, and only 14% of students took part in sufficient levels of physical activity (www.heapro.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/dam021v2). School children are already under the spotlight with moves to make school canteen food healthy, remove soft drink vending machines and boost children's activities.

Why Should We Care about Obesity?

High body weight and inadequate activity increase the risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, stroke and important cancers, including breast, bowel and womb cancer (Cancer Council Australia, 2007). Obese children and adolescents are at higher risk of

diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and fatty liver disease. So-called "adult onset" diabetes (Type 2) is now being found in children. Almost one in five NSW adolescents in a recent study were found to have high insulin levels in their blood, a step on the way towards Type 2 diabetes. The same study found that one in 10 boys had disease markers in their livers and 10% had risk factors for heart disease, such as high levels of "bad" cholesterol and low levels of "good" cholesterol. Fewer girls had these signs of disease, except high "bad" cholesterol, which was found more often in girls than in boys.

Some researchers, such as Michael Gard of Charles Sturt University and Jan Wright at the University of Wollongong, argue that "hyping" the obesity issue may contribute to eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa. So it is important to work towards preventing both eating disorders and overweight and obesity, ideally by focusing on healthy lifestyles for all children and adolescents. Practical ways to maintain or move towards a healthier weight include healthy eating and drinking, being active, limiting time spent on television and small screen recreation (Fig. 3).

Endpoint

The obesity epidemic is an important problem for Australia and Australians. Eating and drinking too much and moving too little cause weight gain, but a wide range of factors beyond individual control drive poor nutrition and sedentary living. This means a wide range of changes to the obesogenic environment in which we live is necessary to reverse the epidemic. The news media is highlighting important aspects of the obesity epidemic and thus playing an important role in raising public awareness. However, our research suggests that professional practices in journalism create patterns of coverage that downplay some of the important issues in obesity. Critical approaches to media coverage could include considering issues of blame, responsibility, stigma, the role of government and industry, and the importance of political, cultural and environmental approaches to solving the obesity problem.

The NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity is funded by NSW Health.