

CHANGING CULTURE

Yesterday: Cigarettes

Today: Obesity

Having won the public's heart and mind in the war against smoking, government is now going after obesity. While there are dangers in spending too much public money on the effort and intruding in an adult's right to sloth and unhealthiness, we wish success to the government — and employers, schools, etc. — in this culture-changing cause.

It took several years after the ground-breaking 1964 U.S. Surgeon General's Report on Smoking and Health for the weight of public opinion to shift against cigarettes. The ban on TV commercials came in 1971 and the ban on smoking on commercial airline flights in the late 1980s. Later still came bans on smoking in public places. At some point, the movement reached critical mass now is seen by most Americans as uncool, unsafe, harmful-to-others and just plain unacceptable.

Next up: Obesity.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control, obesity among Americans between ages 20 and 74 increased from 15 percent in 1976–1980 to 33 percent in 2003–2004. According to the local nonprofit group Community Choices, one in four Clark County adults was overweight in 2005, up from one in six in 1996.

But obesity, which leads to a multitude of health problems, is different. Unlike smoking, one person's indulgence doesn't affect the health of those riding in the same car, living in the same house, working in the same office or eating in the same restaurant.

But it is still a public health issue so long as hospitals charge higher rates because uninsured obese people come to emergency rooms and so long as Medicare and other government programs help pay medical bills.

With this public health issue, as with just about everything else in this hurry-up world, critical mass probably will be reached faster than it was with smoking.

It is happening before our very eyes. For example, at Clark College, (the first community college

in the state to ban smoking on campus), President Bob Knight capped his State of Clark College address last week by leading a brisk half-mile walk, accompanied by about 60 students, faculty and staff. The walk underscored the Healthy Penguin Initiative Knight announced in his speech. (See www.clark.edu/healthypenguin.)

Wednesday, The Columbian's Michael Andersen reported how John Wiesman, county public health director, intends to make his agency an anti-obesity advocate "on behalf of your heart, your pancreas and your waistline. ... Wiesman has become convinced that breaking the American habits of poor nutrition and sedentary living ... will require more than just fees, regulations and informational pamphlets."

His assault on the culture of obesity will include working with schools, churches, clubs, restaurants, architects and businesses to influence the lessons they teach, the food they serve, the stairways they design and the incentives they offer to eat well and exercise.

As if on cue, leaders of the nonprofit group Community Choices met Tuesday with local-government leaders to promote its "Walking: All Reasons, All Seasons" campaign to reduce obesity (www.walkclarkcounty.org).

While medical factors contribute to some obesity, in most cases the problem can be mitigated by personal choices. Acting in behalf of all taxpayers, governments are spreading that message.

*Health
department
supports
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pancreas and
waistline.*
