

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Two approaches to the obesity epidemic in the US

There is little doubt that the US is facing an obesity epidemic. In 1961 the average person in the US consumed 2,881 kilocalories of food a day. Of that amount, just under 2/3, 1,871 kilocalories, came from vegetal products and the balance 1,010 kilocalories came from animal products.

By 2009, the daily per capita consumption of food had jumped to 3,688 kilocalories, an increase of 807 kilocalories. And 804 of those calories came from vegetal products, mostly vegetable oils and sugars.

The result of this increase in the daily per capita consumption of food in the US has been a significant increase in the number and proportion of people who are classified as obese or morbidly obese. Tragically this involves children as well as adults.

Health experts have long-warned that obesity is accompanied by increased health problems, particularly an increase in the incidence of diabetes.

One approach to this epidemic is exemplified by the recent decision by the City of New York to ban certain sugary drinks in sizes above 16 oz. The exemplar of the drink that is being banned is one that is attractive to youth, a 32 oz. fountain sugar sweetened soda that contains around 430 empty calories.

There is nothing in the law to prevent kids, or adults, from purchasing two 16 oz. drinks, but to the extent that does not happen, proponents of the law can argue that the ban on large drinks is having a beneficial impact. On the other hand, if consumers buy twice as many of these 16 oz. drinks, the law will have been an exercise in futility.

The other approach is the one recently announced by McDonalds, and expected to be followed by their competitors. The McDonalds approach is to include the calorie count—along with other nutrition components like sodium—on the menu board. Some of those calories are provided by vegetal oils that are used to deep fry everything from French fries to chicken nuggets. This approach is consistent with economic theory that holds for full transparency between buyer and seller—in this case providing the consumer with more information at the time of sale.

To the extent the consumer chooses to use this information to purchase lower calorie meals, this approach will contribute toward a decrease in the obese portion of the population.

Which approach is better? The jury is still out.

What is clear is that the US is facing a crisis in health care that is in part brought on by a 28 percent increase in the daily per capita consumption of food since 1961 and we need to continue to experiment with ways to bring those numbers down to a more healthy level.

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