The Public Health Issues of Child Obesity

Led by Seema S. Sonnad

Preface:

According to the Institutes of Medicine, the increasing number of obese children and youth throughout the United States has led policy makers to rank it as a critical public health threat. Since the 1970s, the prevalence of childhood obesity has increased significantly for all age groups. A confluence of factors has led to the rise of obesity and it is recognized that an action plan for addressing the problem must include families, local and national governments and the schools.

Lively discussions about student eating habits, including the infamous Philadelphia “black bag” and barriers to healthier nutrition and exercise patterns were discussed. Seminar fellows each designed their own syllabus focused on the area of obesity most relevant to their planned unit, while we additionally examined the many factors contributing to childhood obesity. We began by looking at the extent of the problem and the current and potential consequences, and then looked at the roles of media, local communities, the schools, and home environments in both promoting and potentially combating childhood obesity.

Our vital classroom discussions were supplemented with readings from Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance, an Institute of Medicine publication. Units spanned teaching younger children better nutritional choices, the range of vegetarian choices, and the history of the school lunch program as well as several units aimed at teaching students more about nutrition, exercise and how to interpret information. The curriculum units presented below provide a wide range of approaches for arming students against the growing problem of obesity.

--Seema S. Sonnad, Associate Professor of Surgery