

# INTRODUCTION

## **Policy Forum:** *Confronting the Problems of Overweight and Obesity*

Most of us have had the embarrassing (and sometimes horrifying) experience of seeing photographs of ourselves taken some 25 or 30 years ago, only to realize that “back then” we were but a mere fraction of our present body size and shape. We wonder “What happened?” When this experience occurs just after end-of-year holidays, it can be the stimulus for numerous resolutions to address these parts of our personal lifestyles in the effort to return to a shape and size we once were.

In recent years, those of us who have devoted our lives and careers to the health and health-related professions have become increasingly aware, as have all who are exposed to the national news media, that Americans (and North Carolinians) collectively are gaining weight at an alarming pace. Recent analyses of data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) indicate that as many as 17% of U.S. children and adolescents are overweight and 32.2% of adults are obese. Others have estimated that as many as 65% of American adults are either overweight (BMI of 25-29.9) or obese (BMI of 30 or higher). And, it is the velocity of these increases which is of even greater concern. Most of us have seen the maps produced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) which, when rapidly viewed in sequence, seem to show the nation becoming “heavier” with each successive picture.

There is some good news in that the rate at which average weight in our population has been increasing over the six-year period from 1999 to 2004 is somewhat lower for women than for men, children and adolescents. From the perspective of most highly respected organizations and individuals in the field of public health, we are facing a substantial “epidemic” of overweight and obesity in this country, and North Carolina is a state where these trends are most evident.

There have been efforts to “account for” and “explain away” some of the extent, if not the likely health consequences, of these trends. One paper gaining substantial interest this past year, by Flegal and colleagues, argues that obesity, as a cause of death is far less significant than many have estimated. But the fact remains, that the percentage of our population who meet the criteria for overweight and obesity has increased significantly, and we know that there are health and healthcare costs associated with these trends.

The *North Carolina Medical Journal* has assembled in this issue a number of commentaries addressing various aspects of this epidemic in an attempt to underscore the significance of these trends for our state and our healthcare arena. We are grateful to all our contributors, particular Dr. Don Bradley of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, who has provided the overview Issue Brief. We are also pleased that three of our state’s largest private philanthropies (The Duke Endowment, the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, and the NC Health and Wellness Trust Fund Commission) have each contributed descriptions of programs and initiatives they have funded to assist in addressing these issues. We are also pleased that some of the authors in this issue bring important “national” perspectives to bear on these topics. We appreciate the contributions of Steven Reinemund, CEO of PepsiCo and LuAnn Heinen of the National Business Group on Health, as well as Donald Hensrud of the Mayo Clinic, who have helped us put many aspects of these trends into a broader perspective.

We are aware that there are those who have resisted the use of the term “epidemic” to describe the trends we highlight in this issue of the Journal. But, few can argue that these trends are not occurring, and at an alarming pace. Addressing these issues will require the concerted efforts of healthcare professionals and healthcare organizations, voluntary organizations, employers, public schools, and local civic organizations. We hope that these commentaries will help illuminate the many ways in which these problems can (and are) being addressed in our state.

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