

Norman Rae Dissertation Medal

Designing a national strategy aimed at preventing childhood obesity: a psychosocial approach

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Childhood obesity is a complex condition with a multi-factorial aetiology, which includes genetic, psychosocial and environmental factors¹. Consequently, preventive measures must be equally diverse and address diet control, environment optimisation, and public education. Perhaps the greatest challenge will be the co-ordination of these efforts, as together they will be more effective than any one measure alone.²

The majority of the approaches for preventing obesity are based on modifying the behaviour of obese individuals. Cognitive biases, notably the attribution bias³ and the fundamental attribution error,⁴ focus the blame on the individuals, persuading the public and the

obese to see their condition as a consequence of personal flaws such as laziness or incompetence.⁵ These psychological stereotypes lead us to think that the only way to prevent obesity is to reform personal character. This is counter-productive because it undermines the multi-factorial approach necessary for prevention.

It is important to remember that children differ from adults in their maturity and therefore preventive measures should account for their stage of physical and intellectual development. It is also necessary to be mindful that preventing obesity is not entirely about physical health, and a more holistic approach with regard for the child's psychological and social well-being is more appropriate and effective.

References

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