

Health care reform includes healthy food choices

Colman McCarthy | Oct. 21, 2009



(MScott)

What's the real problem with our nation's health care? Try salt, sugar, fat and corn syrup.

Those are the ubiquitous ingredients of the nation's disease foods, the ones that helped push the 2008 medical cost of obesity to \$147 billion, and fill the country's emergency rooms, clinics and hospitals with people demanding relief from hypertension, diabetes and heart attacks.

In the high-decibel health care debate, how often is personal irresponsibility cited as a major cause of the high cost of medical care? About as rarely as poor dietary choices. About as rarely as self-destructive lifestyle choices, starting with the absence of exercise.

Eating what's sugary, salty and fatty, washing it down with what the \$13.1 billion soft drink industry provides, is a form of living dangerously -- however much the makers of disease foods market them as fun foods. Little sympathy is owed those who recklessly bring on their own diet-caused illnesses, and then finger Big Insurance or Big Pharmaceuticals as greedy predators. Instead of empathy, the sugar-salt-and-fat crowd deserves scorn for running up the insurance rates for those whose diets are rational and healthy, diets that create wellness, not illness.

Politicians who bemoan that 16 percent of the gross domestic product goes to health care pander to the public by demanding reforms for insurance and drug companies while not also calling on citizens to reform their dietary offenses.

Barack Obama could do it, but who is he to talk? In Washington he makes well-publicized drop-ins to hot dog and hamburger joints for mealtime grease jobs.

Two miles north of the White House, he lunched on sausage and cheese at Ben's, ?home of the famous Chili Bowl.? For his next cholesterol fix, it was off to Five Guys Burgers and Fries. Regular fella Joe Biden came

along for that one, as he did when hosting the Cambridge cop and Harvard professor at the Rose Garden for beers. Why alcohol?

During his recent visit to Paris, the president hailed French cooking, laced as it is with artery-clogging butter and cream, which guarantees heart bypass surgeons endless customers.

Reforming health care by reforming our food choices won't happen by legislation nor by sticking warning labels on bags of Cheetos. A public health campaign might help -- as it caused smoking to decline in the past 20 years -- except that intellectual arguments tend to lose out to emotional arguments. When knowledge competes against pleasure, pleasure usually wins -- or more accurately, takes the cake. Who doesn't know that salt, sugar and fat are unhealthy? What the mind understands, the tongue undermines. Tastiness is a preexisting condition.

On Aug. 16, the president wrote in an 800-word column in *The New York Times* that "we must start holding insurance companies accountable" for their fine-print deceits. A worthy piece, except it lacked fiber by not calling on citizens to be accountable too, starting with their food choices. While much of the Third World battles diseases of poverty such as malaria, onchocerciasis and malnutrition, First World Americans fight diseases of wealth.

A combination of forces is the solution. Impose taxes on soft drinks and disease foods. Raise property taxes on the McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's and Taco Bell empires. Lower the taxes on health food stores. In schools, teach nutrition with the same zeal devoted to math and science courses. Give tax credits to vegetarians, vegans, bicycle commuters, and anyone who runs a marathon. Make Patch Adams or Neal Barnard, two of the nation's wisest doctors, the surgeon general. Cancel all TV reruns of Julia Child, the lethal kitchen queen of butter and cream. Instruct Obama to avoid Five Guys Burgers and Fries and head for Whole Foods, six blocks from the White House.

Without a few of these efforts, the calls for health care reform are hard to swallow.

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