

## **Bioethics Case Study: Public Health Interventions in Childhood Obesity and Moral Conflicts**

Childhood Obesity has become epidemic in the United States; and some developed and developing countries may not lag far behind US in this regard as they increasingly adopt western dietary patterns of large portions of fat-laden fast food, microwave pre-packaged meals, high-fructose corn syrup condiments and drinks, and sedentary ways of living. In the United States, the percentage of children overweight or obese is growing at an alarming rate with 1 out of every 3 kids overweight or obese. Obesity is a risk factor in many costly chronic problems such as diabetes and cancer. And, obese kids unhappy with their weights have been known to be prone to low self-esteem, are more likely to be teased, bullied or rejected by their peers. Such stressful situations may result in unhealthy dieting habits like anorexia nervosa and bulimia with concomitant susceptibility to depression and substance abuse. Inasmuch as these conditions are harmful and affect the present and future health and quality of life of affected children, they raise social justice concerns of bioethics and public health that must be addressed and resolved for the common good.

Only very few people would disagree that something must be done about the complex problem of obesity. However, while some people believe that an intervention like decreasing caloric intake and increasing caloric expenditure would fix the problem, others are not so sure. Accruing research evidence suggests that soliciting the views and participation of all stakeholders that constitute the “built environment” and whose actions are interconnected or interdependent is critical to achieving effective solutions. Children, however, have limited capacity to comprehend the risks and benefits of any intervention or of the built environments in which they find themselves, which may not support healthy living. Because children are not fully autonomous, parents have the ethical obligation and the legal right and responsibility to protect their children. And some parents may have children with special needs that must be attended to as well.

Not the least problematic are the tensions between individual rights and liberty-limiting public policies designed to promote the public's health. . Everyone has the right to eat what he or she wants, even when the choice is bad from a health perspective. But at what point, if any, should public policy regarding the public's health trump individual rights? Policies that limit what people can eat or vendors sell, such as banning or taxing unhealthy food often are accused of being paternalistic or creating a “nanny state.” But proponents of such measures believe that they are especially appropriate when they restrict, for example, marketing of unhealthy foods to children.

Eliteville, is the county seat in a county that state public health officials have determined is both poorest and the most obese county in the state. Shocked by these statistics, the Mayor of Eliteville created an action committee to arrest and reverse the trend toward increasing obesity. If Eliteville succeeds in substantially reducing childhood overweight and obesity, the County could become a model for the nation. Because of all the publicity their campaign to address obesity has aroused, Eliteville Mayor Searchright has been asked to appear before a panel of legislators charged with addressing the issue at the state level.

To present policy recommendations that are both practical and ethically defensible to legislators during their next session, the Mayor is looking for guidance from the **2015 Public Health Problem Solvers International Group, Inc. (PHPSIG Inc.)**. The group includes child health advocates, researchers, academicians, health care providers, dieticians, nutritionists, parents, governmental and non-governmental organization, public health officials, and bioethicists. The Mayor wants this group to help identify (1) the causes of overweight and childhood obesity in Eliteville, (2) the ethical values to be aware of, (3) the moral obligations of the various stakeholders, (4) the justifiability--regardless of their popularity-- of intervention measures, that address obesity in the context of holistically promoting community health in its widest sense and (5) any further ethically appropriate research that will be needed to provide an evidence base to inform future policies

### Instruction

Given the increased knowledge you have gained from the bioethics lecture and discussion, assume you are the consulting **2015 Public Health Problem Solvers International Group, Inc. (PHPSIG Inc.)**. Role-play this situation with the discussion questions below in mind. Let two people serve as Eliteville community representatives. Have one person play the role of Eliteville University researcher. Have someone represent the Eliteville school system, and have someone assume the role of the clergy. Let one person represent the food companies in Eliteville. Let someone play the scribe and another person play the spokes-person or Lead-Consultant for PHPSIG Inc. who will facilitate discussion. Other students will serve as participant-observers who could speak or contribute their thoughts or raise pertinent questions at any point during the discussion when they are recognized by the PHPSIG Inc. Lead-Consultant. Provide the recommendations of the group to Eliteville Mayor Searchright.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the task with which the group is charged?
2. What facts about the case are particularly disturbing to you?
3. What are the bioethical/ethical dilemmas that loom large in this case?
4. Who are the parties (stakeholders) involved in the case?
5. What stakes or interests does each party have in the case that they would most strongly wish to protect or, conversely, might be willing to forgo?
6. Who is harmed if nothing is done?
7. What role, if any should the nutritional need of children with special needs play in deciding what should be done?
8. What are some defensible options for Eliteville?
9. What values, ethical theories or principle(s) would you appeal to when justifying any of the options?
10. Which is the best option?
11. How should Eliteville proceed with the best option or options?
12. What recommendations will you give the Mayor?

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