
Renowned Professor Tags Obesity as Biggest health Threat

By JASON G. HOWE

DOVER - Ask world renowned public health professor Mariano Giacchi about the gravest problem facing societies worldwide and his answer may come as a surprise.

It's obesity.

Not AIDS, malaria or avian bird flu - obesity.

"We are not talking about just the personal, physical level, but about the socio-economic and societal level all around the world, not just the west," Giacchi said during an interview in Dover Monday morning. "Obesity is the main epidemiological issue around the world. This is particularly true for children."

Giacchi - professor of biology and director of the Public Health program at the roughly 750-year-old University of Siena in Tuscany, Italy - spent Sunday night with an old friend, Rose Manes, a former Associate Professor of Health Records Administration at Bridgeport College in Connecticut.

"I feel like we've got a giant among us and people don't even know it," Manes said following the interview Monday. The duo planned to visit colleagues in Bridgeport, Conn., before Giacchi returns home.

In what time he had in Dover, though, Giacchi discussed his most recent study of what he considers the world's greatest looming health risk.

"This is an interjoining [sic] of ... causes," he said in a thick, Italian accent - pausing and shrugging to find the right words. "We have found a correlation between (lower) education levels and poverty and low income. These people are more likely to be obese."

But his research, he says, is not meant to identify groups more likely to be at risk, but to help shape local, national and international policy dealing not only with what foods people consume, but how they burn off those calories.

The problem is bigger than children - most often those of poorer families - sitting in front of the television, where they are not only sedentary, but are more likely to not only eat, but consume junk food.

"This is a problem everywhere in the West, and in the world," he said.

It's marketing, to which children are more susceptible - particularly those parked in front of a TV or computer.

It's the empty calories children consume. It's the high fat and salt intakes. It's the lack of parents at home - since many parents are either single, and working, or married, but both working - to guide their children's eating and exercising habits.

And it all feeds into a cycle that must be broken if today's youth are to develop free of not only the physical burden of being obese, but the financial costs that accompany obesity, he said.

"When you're talking about changing children, which is where our focus is, you need to work with them early. It needs to be habit," he said of not just healthy eating, but exercise. "The component people often forget is that physical activity must accompany the consumption of calories. You see? So with no way to work them off, you are missing half of the equation."

It is the same proposal he has published in several books, and a perspective he has pushed on the international stage for several years.

"We must work at this," he said of his efforts. "There is no other option."



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