

PCRM

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February 21, 2012

Mr. Joseph Nadglowski
President and CEO
Obesity Action Coalition
4511 North Himes Ave, Suite 250
Tampa, FL 33614

Dear Mr. Nadglowski:

Thanks for your letter about PCRM's billboards. I appreciate the work you do in trying to promote a healthier approach to weight issues. All of us are learning as we go. In that spirit, let me tell you my thinking at the moment and invite you to share whatever information you feel would be helpful.

To state the obvious, overweight increases the risk of diabetes and prediabetes, which already affect more than 100 million Americans, as well as postmenopausal breast cancer and other serious problems. Many children today are at extraordinarily high long-term risk, and overweight is often the first indicator that maladaptive dietary habits are at play.

Cheese consumption has risen dramatically in recent years. Its fat content is enormous, and yet most people seem not to have made the connection with obesity. PCRM's billboards linked cheese to obesity, using objective images of obesity as it is. While some people have called the images shocking, they are exactly what many people see in the mirror every morning. The media response has been one of surprise, indicating that most people had no idea that cheese could play such a role.

A number of people have made the point that some overweight people also suffer from poor self-esteem, often because their weight-loss efforts have not been very successful and because the media portray obesity negatively. Yale's Rudd Center recommends showing overweight people in "diverse activities, roles, careers, and lifestyle behaviors" where the focus is on something other than weight, and not using images of specific body parts.

This approach is useful insofar as it aims to combat discriminatory attitudes, but it is less helpful when the issue at hand is obesity itself. The vast majority of American adults are now overweight or obese, and while self-esteem issues are relevant for some, the opposite situation—a lack of appropriate concern and a lack of understanding of what to do about it—is probably more common. A recent John Hopkins University study showed that overweight doctors were much less

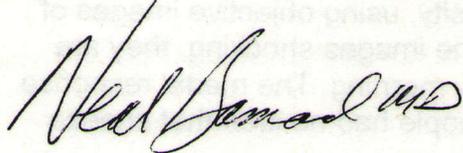
likely to address weight problems in their patients, compared with normal-weight doctors, and much of the rest of the population is following suit.

Imagine the situation of a pediatrician who finds a six-year-old patient to be seriously overweight. The appropriate response cannot be to help the child and parents accept obesity. Rather, it is essential to convey serious concern and work with the parents to share that concern and to embark on long-term changes in the family.

One of the main reasons that obesity is so common is that the population has not gotten the message that cheese, meat, and other junk foods are primary contributors. Children whose households are free of these foods are extremely unlikely to develop weight problems. Unfortunately, many people imagine that obesity is caused by carbohydrate or a lack of exercise, neither of which is the issue, judging from the scientific literature.

Our aim is to offer a solution, which is to help people get away from unhealthy foods, and we provide many resources for doing that. We encourage parents to stop serving cheese, meat, and other junk foods to children and encourage adults to skip these foods, too. That is a tall order, of course, in the present climate. It is also true that, when weight problems have taken hold, it is hard for some people to return to a healthy weight. However, I think the answer is to try to understand the problem, particularly the drivers of overeating, as well as to combat unhealthy diets with education, creative nutrition programs, and changes in public policy.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Neal Barnard MD". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Neal Barnard, MD