

The Fattening of America and Health Care Reform

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The unacknowledged “800-pound gorilla” in the ongoing health care reform caucuses on Capitol Hill and in the White House weighs . . . well, far more than 800 pounds. That “gorilla” could literally make quality health care for the uninsured masses a political pipe dream or a budget nightmare. The stealth “gorilla” I have in mind is the fattening of Americans that could be encouraged by warm-hearted plans to subsidize everyone’s health care demands.

The statistics on the fattening of America over the past half century are stark. More than two out of every three Americans are overweight. Over a third are obese, two and a half times the obesity rate in 1960 and more than ten times the obesity rate at the turn of the twentieth century. The country is growing the next generation of obese adults with the expanding count of obese kids.

For decades, excess weight and obesity have been causally linked to as many as thirty-five diseases -- including hypertension, heart disease, various cancers (breast, colon, and prostate), type-2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, gallbladder disease, and incontinence. More recently, obesity has been linked to impaired brain function and the incidence of Alzheimer’s among the elderly. And only a minor percentage of excess weight can be chalked up to genetic abnormalities.

Researchers have estimated that the total medical cost of treating diseases related to obesity was \$147 billion in 2008, roughly 10 percent of all medical spending. That year the real (inflation-adjusted) health care expenditures for obesity, half of which were covered by

Medicaid and Medicare, were 50 percent greater than the real health care expenditures for the obese in 1998.

Between 1960 and 2006, American adults (20 to 74 years of age) gained an average of more than 26 pounds. That might not sound like much, but it means that the “average” adult American today is hauling around the equivalent of a large Thanksgiving turkey -- over and above what the average American weighed in 1960. And there were plenty of overweight Americans then.

The added weight gained during the last half century means that adult Americans (just those in the 20-74 age group) today weigh nearly *3 million tons* more than they would have weighed in total had they stayed as “trim” as they were in 1960. That added tonnage equals more than 34 million undocumented 1960-equivalent American adults (or 3.4 million of the fabled 800-pound gorillas) whom we are hauling around in our cars and planes. (A flight attendant’s announcement today that the “plane will be full,” could be understood in a way and to a degree not considered a generation ago.)

The total weight Americans have gained during the past fifty years also equals 29 billion three-ounce Twinkies, which is more than 57,000 times the annual world output of Twinkies. It equals the weight of more than 180,000 empty 75-foot, eighteen-wheel tractor-trailers that, if put end to end, would stretch, via the shortest road route possible, from Los Angeles almost to Capitol Hill. And these figures do not include the pounds added by the hundred million or so overweight kids and teenagers or seniors 75 and older. If their extra tonnage were added to the total, the lineup of tractor-trailers would extend from Los Angeles to way out into the Atlantic.

American’s added weight negates, albeit somewhat, the fuel economy advances automobile manufacturers have been able to achieve in recent decades and has caused American

car buyers to move to larger cars (SUVs included). Overall, according to research, Americans are burning close to a billion gallons of gasoline plus a billion gallons of jet fuel a year more than would have been required had Americans maintained their 1960 average weight. A nontrivial source of the current red ink of airlines can be seen in the extent to which passengers are filling up their seats.

Of course, the greater gasoline and jet fuel consumption has marginally propped up the price of oil and financed some of the political instability and terrorist activities emanating from the Middle East. And the greater fuel consumption pumps tens of millions of tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, also a source global health problems. In a small way, the fates of the polar bears and the Arctic ice shelves have links to the pounds Americans have packed on over the last half century, or more.

How does Americans' added weight affect the health care reform debate? Consider the extra cost of reinforced wheel chairs, gurneys, and ambulances that communities now must buy for their newfound "peak-load problems." Consider the number of television ads for "scooters" (at, of course, subsidized prices for the featured overweight buyers). Recognize that such costs can expand radically when all "preexisting conditions" must be covered (regardless of whether they are self-inflicted).

Then consider how any form of nationalized or just subsidized health care can shift, through taxes and insurance premiums, the costs of overeating and sedentary lifestyles from heavy people to trim people who have, at some personal costs, kept their appetites under control, lowering the private costs of weight gain to everyone. Everyone has to worry that government-subsidized health insurance and health care will cause Americans to pack on pounds with even greater abandon, which can give rise to an array of "fat taxes" (and other federal mandates) that

will force trim people to pay more for their occasional single-patty burger just to discourage all overweight people from all too frequently doubling up on triple-patty burgers.

If people truly want health care reform, and health insurance at a more modest price, there is a simple private solution: America, go on a diet!

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