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The Public Health Institute promotes health, well-being and quality of life for all people through research and evaluation, training and technical assistance, and by building community partnerships.

Reversing Childhood Obesity: A Battle We Cannot Lose

MARY A. PITTMAN

In the span of only three decades, childhood obesity in the United States has tripled. One in three young people, or more than 23 million children and youth, are overweight or obese. In certain ethnic and racial groups, the rates are even greater. Physicians are diagnosing children with health conditions that once were seen almost exclusively in adults. Today, children living with high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and gallstones are becoming common. Most important, much of this childhood obesity, like its counterpart in adults, is preventable.

Childhood obesity has profound personal, familial, community, and national health and economic consequences ranging from crushing direct medical expenses for obesity-related illnesses to the severe emotional stress children and their families encounter when a loved one is faced with a life-threatening condition.

The environmental, community, social and economic factors that contribute to obesity must be addressed to stop this epidemic. Quality and nutritious food choices must be available in homes and schools, safe neighborhoods and access to areas for physical activity must be present in all communities, excess caloric intake should be avoided, and ethical marketing practices should favor healthy children. It will take a unified and determined effort, but the battle against childhood obesity can be won.

The public health community plays an important role in this effort by broadening the discussion to include social determinants of health, thus shifting the focus away from individual choice to environmental, social and economic causes. This discussion requires us to identify the social and economic factors we use to talk about community health, individual health and neighborhood vitality. Our public health approach also provides context and meaning to such seeming contradictions as food insecurity on the one hand and childhood obesity on the other.

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The Public Health Institute (PHI) has exercised leadership to improve childhood nutrition, increase physical activity and prevent obesity for more than 20 years, and we will continue to do so. Since the early 1990s, PHI has pioneered this work through cutting-edge, population-based research and community engagement programs; school and statewide policy change; and the effective use of media in framing the obesity epidemic as a critical public health challenge.

PHI tackles the epidemic from multiple angles:

- PHI assists the California Department of Public Health in operating the *Network for a Healthy California*, the largest social marketing program in the nation dedicated to informing low-income parents and children about the importance of increasing both the consumption of fruits and vegetables and increasing physical activity. A statewide media campaign has been essential to the success of the *Network*. Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, this program is showing some positive results. An ongoing research program tracks the progress through systematic surveys of this focused population.
- PHI assists California Project LEAN (CPL) and its funding partners in engaging adolescents, their parents and local school boards in changing school and community policies to reduce childhood obesity. Two CPL studies revealed that fast foods and soft drinks commonly sold in schools were adding to the problems resulting from poor nutrition – and led the effort to spark landmark state legislation that bans the sale of junk foods and soda in high schools across the state.
- PHI's Healthy Eating, Active Communities work, developed and funded by The California Endowment (TCE), focuses on the local policies and places most impacted by this epidemic. The California Convergence, funded by Kaiser Permanente and TCE, unites the major initiatives in the state that are using environmental approaches to prevent childhood obesity. The 26 communities involved share knowledge, tools, resources and advocacy to accelerate progress and build this movement.
- The award-winning Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) at PHI supports public health professionals and advocates in preventing childhood obesity by training them to use the news, broadcast and online media more effectively and by framing their issues within a public health context. BMSG also works with journalists and other communications professionals, training them to view and present their stories from a public health perspective.
- Public Health Law & Policy supports community and government efforts to prevent childhood obesity through model ordinances, land use policies and legal research that address marketing aimed at children, schools and child care settings.

Mary A. Pittman is president and chief executive officer of the Public Health Institute.

- PHI programs inform policymakers on obesity in a number of other ways. For example, a California Center for Research on Women and Families primer helps policymakers and other leaders by detailing nutrition-related state and federal policies, programs and laws and by painting a statistical picture of the weight, eating habits and physical activity of Californians. The center also educates legislators through a policy forum each year. The California Healthy Cities and Communities program at PHI's Center for Civic Partnerships shows local leaders how to provide residents with better options for healthy eating and physical activity. Another important resource is the California Adolescent Health Collaborative, which provides information on childhood obesity, nutrition and physical activity in the context of adolescent health.

The epidemic of childhood obesity tests our national will to identify and address the complex factors that contribute to the rapid transformation in the ways we live, work, eat and play in this country. PHI will continue to use its Web site, www.Dialogue4Health.org, as a collaboration tool to elevate this conversation and invite diverse professionals to stimulate a more robust dialogue. As often reported, the longer this epidemic persists, the more likely it is that American children will, for the first time since records have been kept, live sicker and die younger than their parents' generation.

The time to act is now. As President Obama stated in his speech on health reform, "We did not come here to fear the future, we came here to shape it." Please join me in leading a national dialogue and actions to improve community health so that all individuals have the opportunity to be healthy. ■

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding provides resources to improve community health

MATTHEW MARSOM

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announcement that \$650 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funding will be invested in prevention is welcome news for public health advocates working to prevent chronic diseases brought on by obesity and tobacco use. For the first time the federal government is providing funding with an unambiguous focus on promoting social, environmental and policy change to reduce inequalities in individual and community health.

This focus on policy change will have long-lasting impacts in helping shape environments supporting healthy children and healthy communities. Of course, ARRA investments alone will not be enough to address the systemic and deep-rooted problems in our society that contribute to chronic diseases and obesity.

PHI will be joining with other committed advocates to ensure that prevention is a key element of health reform. PHI has renewed its long-term commitment to join with government and foundations to provide innovative research and evaluation, programs and partnerships, and support for advocates. In this way, we can provide critical linkages and integrate promising practices across social, environmental and policy change options. ■

Diversity of Focus

LORI DORFMAN

Locally and globally, PHI shares evidence, promotes prevention and builds community in a broad range of public health areas, including:

- Alcohol / Tobacco / Substance Abuse
- Chronic Diseases: Asthma, Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular and Tuberculosis
- Climate Change
- Communicable / Infectious Diseases, including HIV/AIDS
- Community Health
- Disability
- Environmental Health
- Family Planning / Reproductive Health
- Genetics
- Global Health
- Health Policy Research
- Healthy Aging
- Homelessness / Indigent Care
- Leadership Development
- Managed Care
- Maternal & Child Health
- Media Advocacy
- Mental Health
- Nutrition / Physical Activity / Obesity Prevention
- Occupational Health
- Organizational Development
- Program Evaluation
- Rural Health
- Social & Behavioral Science
- Technology in Public Health

DOMESTIC Food marketing goes digital

In 2005, the Institute of Medicine confirmed that food marketing entices children to request and consume foods that they should avoid. Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) has joined with colleagues at the Center for Digital Democracy (CDD) and Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) to learn more about food marketing and do something about it.



Most of the policy debate around food and beverage marketing has focused on TV commercials targeted at young children. But marketing has changed. As one executive from Burger King put it, "The eyeballs have moved."

To where have they moved? In May 2007, BMSG and the CDD released the first analysis showing that food and beverage marketing now extends far beyond TV into an expanding and ubiquitous digital media culture.

Food ads appear on Facebook, in video games, on mobile phones and in online virtual, three-dimensional worlds. Using mobile phone technology that can pinpoint where a young person is standing, food and beverage marketers can send coupons for discounts to young people close to a McDonald's—all out of earshot of parents.

BMSG and the CDD reported their findings to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in 2007. With CSPI, BMSG co-convenes the Food Marketing to Children Workgroup, which, this July, met with the chair of the FTC, the director of its Bureau of Consumer Protection and others at the agency to be sure they understood the new reach food and beverage marketing has into children's lives.

To learn more, go to <http://digitalads.org>. To download "Fighting Junk Food Marketing to Kids: a toolkit for advocates" and see a short video on food marketing, go to <http://www.bmsg.org/proj-food-heac.php>.

INTERNATIONAL PHI project director makes cover of Chinese magazine

LISA AWREY

Teh-wei Hu, director of the Center for International Tobacco Control Policy Research and Evaluation at PHI, was on the cover of the June 2009 issue of *International Talent Monthly*, a highly regarded magazine in China.

With China's economy growing rapidly and advances in technology and medicine, the government-run magazine is aimed at promoting exchange among international experts in these areas. Hu is a leading researcher on tobacco control policies, especially tobacco tax policy research, and an advisor to the Chinese Ministry of Health, the World Bank and the World Health Organization on health care financing and tobacco control. The magazine is published by China's National Bureau of Foreign Experts Affairs.



NEWS FROM THE BOARD



Boufford



Seffrin



Greenfield

The Public Health Institute (PHI) is pleased to announce that three new members are joining its board of directors in January 2010: **Jo Ivey Boufford, MD**, president of The New York Academy of Medicine; **John R. Seffrin, PhD**, chief executive officer of the American Cancer Society; and **Thomas Greenfield, PhD**, center and scientific director of PHI's Alcohol Research Group, who will serve as the principal investigator/program director representative on the board. The new members were elected by the board during its September meeting.

Lori Dorfman directs the Berkeley Media Studies Group (BMSG) at PHI. At BMSG, she leads media training for grass roots organizations and public health leaders, consults for government agencies and community programs, and conducts research on media portrayals of public health issues, including alcohol, tobacco, nutrition, digital marketing of food and beverages, health disparities and violence. Dorfman co-authored the major texts on media advocacy: *Public Health and Media Advocacy: Power for Prevention* and *News for a Change: An Advocate's Guide to Working with the Media*. She teaches a graduate course on mass communication and public health at the University of California at Berkeley's School of Public Health.

Before taking the reins at BMSG in 1998, Dorfman was BMSG's associate director. She earned her doctorate from UC Berkeley's School of Public Health.



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"We're changing the way people think about health..."

New Awards

■ Center for Research on Adolescent Health and Development to evaluate sex-ed initiative

Program Director:
Norman Constantine

Funded by: Planned
Parenthood Los Angeles

To help reduce teen births and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and promote healthy sexuality among youth, the Center for Research on Adolescent Health and Development will evaluate a multicomponent sexuality education initiative in Los Angeles schools. This program includes a classroom curriculum, a parent education component, a peer advocacy component, and a clinic integration component. The Sexuality Education Initiative Demonstration Project is intended to provide a replicable model to Los Angeles Unified School District, the 79 other school districts in Los Angeles County, and other school districts across the state and the country.

■ State Environmental Health Investigations Branch to address climate change and health

Program Director:
Paul English

Funded by: Association of
State and Territorial Health
Officials

To help strengthen state health agencies' capacity to respond to the challenges related to climate change, PHI staff will assist the state of California in developing an assessment of the state's capacity to address climate change and health. This project will assess the needs of state and local health departments and key stakeholders, develop a strategic plan for California's response to climate change public health threats, promote increased awareness about climate change issues within the state health infrastructure and strengthen its capacity to respond to and prepare for them.

■ Center for Technology and Aging to improve care for older adults

Principal Investigator:
David Lindeman

Funded by: The SCAN
Foundation

With increasing numbers of older adults in need of health care, the Center for Technology and Aging has been established to identify and promote the diffusion of technologies that can improve care delivery. Through applied research, grant making and dissemination of findings, the center will support the broad integration of innovative technologies into care processes for older adults. The center will serve as a national resource for policymakers and providers dedicated to using technology to improve the quality and affordability of care for, as well as independence of, older adults dealing with chronic health care issues.

Recent Publication

■ Project LEAN creates new resources for California schools

California Project LEAN (Leaders Encouraging Activity and Nutrition) has partnered with the California School Boards Association to assist school districts and county offices of education with developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating physical activity and physical education programs and policies. They have developed a research brief, on safe routes to school and joint use of facilities, policy briefs, and sample policies. You can find them under "Physical Education/Physical Activity" at www.csba.org/pab.aspx.