

Subsidies needed to combat growing obesity problem: Cash

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News Staff

Of Canadians aged 18 or older, 36.1 per cent are overweight and 23.1 per cent are obese, according to Statistic Canada's 2004 *Canadian Community Health Survey*.

With rising obesity rates in mind, University of Alberta economics professor Dr Sean B Cash spoke of how fat taxes and thin subsidies could be used to encourage Canadians to make healthy choices at last weekend's Philosophers' Café, held at the Stanley A Milner Library.

Cash brought up the concept of energy densities, which is the amount of energy in a unit of food, such as calories per gram. Cash and some of his students, using Edmonton grocery stores, replicated a study on energy densities previously done in Seattle.

"As the energy-density goes up, the cost per unit of energy goes down," Cash said.

Cash explained that this trend results in energy dense foods, like chips, cookies and plain white sugar, being a cheaper way to meet someone's energy needs than healthier alternatives like fruits and vegetables.

"You need to meet your basic energy needs. That is the primary thing with food. Having enough energy to get through your day—to not be going hungry—that comes first," Cash said.

Cash discussed the role government can play in pushing people towards making healthy choices by encouraging the purchase of less energy-dense foods. He provided his thoughts on why the Ontario Liberal government's proposal for a "fat tax," levied on meals that cost less than four dollars, failed.

"A big part of why it failed in Ontario is that it is regressive ... the highest incidence of the taxes is often on lower income people, at least in terms of per cent," Cash said.

Cash then brought up the flipside to fat taxes—subsidizing healthier foods to make them more accessible to those with lower incomes. He said a thin subsidy could be implemented at the grocery till by the government paying the store directly, along with more general approaches.

"[The idea is to look] at what we already do to mess with the prices, [so] that we have programs that make some food items cheaper in the production stage and some food items

more expensive," Cash said.

Shannon Haggarty, spokeswoman for Alberta Ministry of Health and Wellness, couldn't speak for government or opposition members on the research done into fat taxes and thin subsidies.

"As far as an actual policy on the books right now, there isn't anything," Haggarty said.

But Haggarty indicated the Alberta government is promoting healthy lifestyles through advertising campaigns.

"Right now we are targeting youth and younger adults in terms of trying to get them to eat better and to be more active," Haggarty said.

Cash elaborated on what future experiments he hopes to do, combining a fat tax with a stigma established through advertising and labelling of unhealthy food products. He showed the audience an example of three bags of potato chips: one regularly priced, one with a fat tax and one with a fat tax and a "scarlet letter" warning label that would stigmatize the item.

"I'm going to make a big point of telling everyone in Canada that the scarlet letter means it has been subjected to the fat tax. Which are you more likely to buy?" Cash asked.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: KRYSTINA SULATYCKI

EARLY START David Cumming says that waiting to have children could lead to complications and lower birth rates.

Study finds young women more fertile

ANNA JOHNSON
News Writer

Young women may want to put thoughts of a career on hold and instead think about children as a must-have while in their 20s, according to a study at university of Alberta.

Dr David Cumming from the U of A's department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, outlined in the study that the peak fertility of women is at about 25 years old, and noted an increased prevalence of fertility problems faced by women who choose to wait until their 30s or 40s to have children.

"[University-aged women] come from an exact example of this sort of person that potentially runs into trouble," Cumming said. "You're going to be around university for five years maybe? You're going to then go out and establish yourself in a job, have a house, a stable relationship, economic stability, and when you're 30-plus, you start thinking about having babies. That's maybe not the way to do it."

Cumming also noted that, because women are waiting to have children, fertility issues, such as increased risk of chromosomal abnormalities and miscarriages, are decreasing the number of

children being born.

As a result of this trend towards post-career motherhood, Cumming projects that Canada's population won't be able to replace itself.

"The only reason our population is going up is partly because of the baby boom and the sort of subsequent secondary booms that come along and the fact that we've got a lot of immigration ... the average number [of children born per family] is, what? 1.8? [That] is not replacing the population," he said, adding that those that had their first child later in life are less likely to have others later.

The conclusions are supported by Statistics Canada, which revealed that in recent years, immigration has accounted for the two-thirds of Canada's population growth.

University of Alberta sociology professor Dr Kierstin Hatt pointed out the study focuses only on women's fertility rates.

"I think it's interesting [that] the whole question of fertility rates is being framed as a women's issue. While it's clear that the study was on women's fertility rates, the decision about having children isn't really limited to just women. It's a decision that concerns

men and women, singly, together, but also, then, at the societal level."

Hatt also said that there's pressure being put on women by society to want children.

"The implication is that somehow women's individual choices are responsible for maintaining the population rates in Canada, rather than understanding this issue as a societal issue relating to public policy, economics, and immigration, for example."

Fourth-year U of A student Michelle Lennox was surprised by this news but doubtful of its effect.

"I kind of wonder how that's going to work with our generation because I know a lot of women are waiting to have children later in their lives so they can have careers."

For Lennox, however, this study and its implications won't affect her future plans.

"I want to have a career and I think it's important to take the time to do those things for yourself before you settle down and have a family. I think it's fair enough for the women that do want to get married and have children earlier, but for me, that's not my decision, so it won't really affect my decision at all," she said.

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