



MEDDLING TO DO A FAT LOT OF GOOD

We must draw the line and not allow government interference in our fridges

CASSANDRA WILKINSON



ACCORDING to outraged reports last week, Australia is the fattest country in the world.

Research courtesy of the Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute suggests an estimated 9 million adults are wobbling about on the verge of a cardiac arrest. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare confirms 12 million Australians are overweight or obese.

The consequences were called a "fat bomb" which seemed to be an odd boogey man in a world where many people are still more likely to die from eating too little.

Of course these days no public crisis is complete without an estimate of its economic impact and in this case the bill is predicted to reach \$6 billion due to, among other things, 700,000 future heart attacks, strokes and blood clots caused by excess weight.

These reports led to renewed calls for action with one health professor claiming a looming crisis of parents dying too young to see their offspring marry.

There's no question it's preferable to be healthy, and no question most heavy people would prefer to be slim. But there is a serious discussion to be had about calls for government to intervene in the lives of both the heavy and the slim. What can be done remains unclear. What should be done is stickier still given, first, that the fat have a basic right to eat what they want, second that the regulation of food affects the thin and healthy as well as the morbidly obese. Third, somewhere in the middle are many thousands of merely plump, husky and stout citizens who

wear a little extra padding as an accepted consequence of their love of beer, barbecue, real butter, wine, ice cream and cheese.

Even the government accepts weight gain is principally a function of personal choices. The AIHW confirms the causes of obesity — and this will shock you — are energy intake (otherwise known as eating) and energy expenditure (more often called getting off your behind).

But this didn't stop the House Standing Committee on Health and Ageing from concluding that government should act to end fatness noting it, "has the tools: legislation, policy and regulation". The committee compared losing weight to rolling a ball up a large hill and suggested that while government couldn't change the size of the ball it could "reduce the environmental gradient".

To see what is contemplated to slim the fatness slope we can look to the Obesity Policy Coalition, a group of diabetes and heart health charities, which wants to regulate food composition (changing recipes to remove, for example, trans fats); pricing and availability and marketing (including food advertising, promotion and labelling) as well as urban planning and transport.

This affects everything from changing the recipe for Tim Tams to deliberating removing parking spaces from new housing developments to make you walk to the bus stop. More extreme "solutions" proposed by other fat-ivists include making "fat towns" compete in weight loss contests tied to government funding for sporting

and recreational facilities.

Given obesity is demographically skewed toward lower socioeconomic groups this amounts to redistributing resources away from the poor to punish them for their lack of access to personal trainers and fresh kale.

Even if this doesn't sound like too much government in your fridge, the results of similar approaches in other countries indicate well-intentioned intrusions into private consumption choices are ineffective. Less than two years ago, Denmark introduced the world's first fat tax. Foods containing more than 2.3 per cent saturated fat like sausages, butter and syrup waffles (which I personally would risk a small infarction for) were subject to the surcharge. The results? Danes crossed the border to buy delicious treats in Germany, and Denmark lost jobs instead of kilos. The tax was rescinded and a decision taken not to proceed with a sugar tax.

I haven't been on a diet since the late 1980s but I have seen fads come and go for 20 years. Low sugar, low carbs, high protein, whole foods, Mediterranean, CSIRO; I even remember the Israeli army diet. If there were clear, easy-to-follow rules for losing weight that avoided the problem of human self-control Jenny Craig would be long gone.

Until there is, we should be careful about enshrining today's prevailing theories of weight loss into tax law, school funding or the planning act.



back

