

Preface

This project started in the summer of 2003 when Zoltan J. Acs, Kenneth R. Stanton and two graduate students, Robert Like and Haitham Al-Foraih, started to research the topic of business and obesity. Support for the project came from Dean Anne McCarthy of the Merrick School of Business.

The effects of obesity – once an issue to be settled between doctor and patient – have become practically ubiquitous in North American life. Our culture is awash with mixed messages about ‘having it all’ and ‘bigger is better’, not to mention the circus-like atmosphere of weight loss, exercise regimens and proper nutrition. To live in North American society now is to experience everything from an entire television network dedicated to food and food-related news, to constant and occasionally dire warnings about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cholesterol, heart disease, diabetes and a host of other obesity-related ailments. Being overweight is no longer simply a health problem – it is a symptom of a greater cultural shift that shows no sign of abating.

Signs of this change are everywhere, and at the University of Baltimore faculty researchers have taken note of the obesity crisis in the worlds of economics, business and finance, law and public policy. While the current media clamor is focused on the tens of billions¹ of dollars at stake in the behavior modification and medicalization of this issue, under the radar even more important, and occasionally troubling, moves are taking place. Airplane manufacturers and theater designers, for example, are redesigning their products to accommodate larger people. Lawyers who once focused on smoking-related illnesses are turning their attention to the potential culpability of fast food producers in the rise of obesity-related illnesses, especially in younger people. Disability claims related to obesity are on the rise.

The University of Baltimore has established a framework for researching and discussing obesity and its discontents. Faculty analyses from multi-disciplinary perspectives provide a portrait of this complex problem, and potential ways to resolve it. UB will examine the web of underlying causes as an ‘infrastructure of obesity’, resulting from a variety of public policy decisions, economic factors and profit opportunities, in addition to the more obvious health and nutritional aspects of the epidemic. This infrastructure makes it unlikely that a singular solution is possible.

NOTES

- * Some material in the book is taken from an article previously published in a periodical which has been discontinued. Every effort has been made to trace all the copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.
1. The term 'billion' here and throughout this book refers to the American meaning of a thousand million.