Community Intervention
For a Healthier Future

C-PaTH and the Battle Against Adolescent Obesity

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Over a century ago being overweight was a symbol of wealth and power. Contrary to the previous outlook is the way the words “obesity” and “overweight” resonate in society today. It projects negative images, thoughts of unhealthy lifestyles, and generally is associated with the lower class. Obesity, the abnormal accumulation of body fat that is at least twenty percent of a person’s ideal body weight, has been found to be a dangerous condition which can induce a variety of health problems, either physical or psychological, which can potentially lead to death.

Since the 1960s there has been and alarming increase in obesity in America, and while this is a problem for all of America, more recently obesity has become more prevalent among children and teens. These are the future leaders of our world, parents of children, teachers of students, and the role models of generations to come. To create a world of healthy and happy individuals, we need to start with this generation, teaching them how to live healthful prolonged lives. To combat this disease, Marian Medical Center in collaboration with Cal Poly STRIDE and the Santa Maria YMCA, created a multi-intervention pilot program including weekly exercise sessions and nutrition meetings as well as psychological counseling to help obese teenagers reduce their risk of obesity-related diseases such as Type II Diabetes, cardiovascular disease and depression. The main goal of the program was to determine whether a multi-dimensional program such as this would be successful in getting participants to join and to stick through the entire program, and ultimately reduce their health risks.

Childhood Obesity Rates in the U.S.

Seeing as this was only a pilot program, the main challenge faced was funding, and currently no progress has been made to continue it. However, if programs such as C-PaTH are indeed successful in helping teens combat obesity and its related diseases, we need support from a plethora of people and organizations. The question now is will a multi-intervention program be successful in decreasing obesity-related health risks and increasing teenagers’ self-image and self-esteem? And is it feasible to keep teenagers interested and participating in that program for an extended period of time?
Obesity has been evident in human records for over 20,000 years, going all the way back to Stone Age artifacts. The first monographs devoted to obesity appeared during the eighteenth century (Bray). Obesity began with “the taking in of too large a quantity of food, especially of the rich and oily kind.” Later, but still as early as 1901, actuarial data showed that excess weight was associated with a shortened life expectancy.

Before the 1900s, being fat was a mark of wealth and health. In the past, the majority of lower class citizens worked labor-intensive jobs and lived anything but sedentary lifestyles. They walked most places and did most things by hand rather than machine. Since the 1930’s lifestyles have changed and certain aspects of these changes play a major role in the obesity epidemic (Wiley).

After the Industrial Revolution at the beginning of the 19th century, work became less and less labor-intensive: instead of separating cotton by hand, machines were used, instead of building cars one-by-one, the production line was invented, and most of all instead of walking to and from work, people drove. All of these simple life style changes, which may improve efficiency, decreases the energy output of individuals; while expending fewer calories they are able to produce the same amount.

Not only were people not burning as many calories through their daily activities, they were also eating more. For example, portion sizes increased substantially. In 1957, the average hamburger was 1 oz., in 1997 they grew to be 6 oz. On top of that, families began eating in front of televisions as opposed to sitting at a dinner table. Sitting around the dinner table, with family not only extends the time it takes to eat, but also allows individuals to focus on what it is that they are eating, and generally means the meal was made from fresh ingredients. Processed food in TV dinners and fast food take fewer bites to consume which increases the amount of food a person is able to eat in a certain time. It has been shown that mindless eating, or being distracted while eating, causes a person to eat more in a shorter time frame. Overall, people are eating more calories, expending less, and thus gaining weight (McDermott).
How do we get support from parents?

Although seventeen percent of children ages two to nineteen in the United States are documented as being clinically obese, there is still surprising opposition to solutions even with such staggering statistics before us. With physical activity being a large component of overall health, the need for successful exercise programs for obese youth is greater than ever. One of the largest hindrances to teen exercise programs is the lack of support at home from friends and family members. Any progress made during the time span of the exercise program could easily be masked by uncooperative eating and exercise habits while the adolescent is at home, either due to unrealized or direct actions by others. A study conducted in 2003 assessed the impact of an exercise and diet program on obese adolescents and their results showed that “only the subjects who continued exercise training at home [continually] showed improvement” and that “the metabolic benefits of training are quite rapidly lost when the subjects stop exercising” (Brandou). Exercise programs such as C-PaTH can easily reduce this problem by simply inviting parents to sit in on the exercise sessions and engage them in parent-child nutrition classes. When parents model healthy behaviors it engrains a new standard of what is normal in the minds of their children, who will then be more likely to participate and work towards a common goal.

Challenges:

Would an exercise program be enough to bolster the psychological and self-esteem issues that many obese teens face?

It has been shown through various studies that those with overweight or obesity issues face more than just health problems, but have to deal with psychological stress and anxiety as they deal with constant teasing, rejection and poor treatment by others. Many scientific studies as well as C-Path have shown that not only was weight lost but levels of anxiety and depression were significantly lowered in the participants. Obesity is a problem that encompasses all aspects of life, and each area needs to be dealt with through any program that is to be implemented, and C-Path has exceeded in this criteria.
How do we actually pull teenagers away from today’s technological and sedentary lifestyle and get them excited about exercising and healthy behaviors?

A study conducted in the St. Paul Minnesota school district recorded recommendations from overweight youth pertaining to their interest in participating in a school-based weight control program, as well as the outcomes they desired from such a program. Several themes emerged regarding group environment, including one of “trust and confidentiality” and where “issues of weight were taken seriously” (Neumark), depicting the desire to be accepted and secure with leaders and other participants involved in the program. Participants also stressed the desire to increase their knowledge and skills regarding nutrition and physical activity. As far as the types of program activities available, children want activities that are “enjoyable and fun” such as “dancing, biking, Frisbee and swimming” (Neumark). Respondents also felt strongly about an inclusive environment that was supportive and accepting. This is an important message to those who may want to implement a program for overweight youth but feel intimidated designing program activities and aspects that the participants will enjoy.

Despite all of these potential problems regarding participation and commitment to C-PaTH, this successful program is currently not provided in its initial location of Santa Maria, CA. Marian Hospital received initial funds to complete a "pilot program" in order to see if the multifaceted program would indeed be successful in helping decrease health risks, as well as checking the feasibility of the program to be successful in keeping the participants interested over its 20 week duration. Three series elapsed before funding ended; the provider decided this was enough time to collect the data and information. The data has now been analyzed and the results are in, students not only enjoy and look forward to attending C-PaTH sessions, but have shown success in improving physical activity abilities, reducing weight, and increasing positive psychological well-being. Due to C-PaTH’s obvious success, serious consequences arise when the program is no longer being offered to obese teens who could greatly benefit from everything it has to offer. Without C-PaTH up and running Santa Maria and the surrounding community have little to pursue in the form of an accomplished and well-rounded exercise program for their increasing population of overweight youth. The intention is to present the results of C-PaTH to Marian Medical Center in hopes of reintroducing the program with increased funding, staff and participants, all for the benefit of the community as a whole.
This is not a percentage to be ignored. What is worse, overweight or obese children and teenagers are much more likely to become overweight adults unless they change their lifestyles causing obesity. Prevention programs are critical in lowering the rates of obesity, but intervention for those already obese is just as important. By creating opportunities for adolescents to get information and giving them available tools to improve their health, we are creating a better world for everyone. Marian Medical Center’s program C-PaTH set out to do just that.

Unfortunately, the cost of obesity has fallen onto the shoulders of the health care system. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the medical care costs of obesity for the year 2008 were $147 billion. Direct costs include preventative and treatment services. Indirect costs are related to morbidity and mortality, defined by income loss because of decreased productivity and future income loss because of premature death, respectively. “Across all payers, obese people had per capita medical spending that was $1,429 (42 percent) greater than spending for normal-weight people in 2006,” according to one study. These associated costs come from both private and public pockets. Billions of dollars are spent on medication to combat obesity related illness as well.
America is in a time of great transition. Problems as large as this are starting to be looked at from an upstream perspective. That is, it is more efficient to prevent something from happening then to treat the problem after the fact. Programs and initiatives to combat obesity such as C-PaTH are being developed at an alarming rate to match the seriousness of the situation. Even the first lady, Michelle Obama, started her Let’s Move initiative which is designed to combat obesity in the generation of children today. She stated, “this isn’t just a policy issue for me. This is a passion. This is my mission. I am determined to work with folks across this country to change the way a generation of kids thinks about food and nutrition.” Let’s Move is more than just getting kids outside to play. It promotes education in both nutrition and physical activity while involving parents and caregivers. The C-PaTH program parallels this national initiative but on a local level.

The market as a whole is moving towards obesity prevention in adolescents because healthy kids turn into healthy adults. And a life free of obesity and its health related issues not only saves a life, but it also saves billions of dollars in health care costs annually. From combatting the issue at the point of origin, programs and services will prevent the obesity epidemic from growing any further.

“NFL PLAY 60 is the National Football League’s campaign to encourage kids to be active for 60 minutes a day. The program is designed to reverse the current trend of childhood obesity by getting kids active through in-school, after school and team-based programs, online child-targeted outreach on NFLRUSH.com, and many partnerships with like-minded organizations.”
The increasing rate of obesity has now defined the U.S. as one of the fattest countries in the world. The growth of obesity in children is especially devastating as the future of our country is more susceptible to cardiovascular disease, diabetes and other life threatening health problems. Action needs to be taken now in the form of health promotion and education programs aimed at the generation of our future. Programs such as C-PaTH address all aspects of health that obese teens are faced with—physically, socially and psychologically, allowing teens to improve health in more ways than just reducing their weight. Adolescents enrolled in C-Path have fun exercising by engaging in entertaining activities with their peers two to three times a week and also learn about healthy food choices through weekly enjoyable nutritional classes. Working with sympathetic and understanding leaders and peers, and discussions regarding emotions also bolstered the psychological support aspect of the program. Data supports the success of C-PaTH as the lab tests, body composition tests and emotional indicators all showed significant improvement as the program elapsed. Participants in C-PaTH were able to enjoy the program, and saw it as more of a fun after school activity rather than an “intervention”. If more programs similar to C-PaTH were available in other schools or community organizations across the country it would be an enormous accomplishment towards reversing the obesity epidemic.

Reversing the Trends: Action is Needed **NOW!**

Implementing a teen obesity program helps those that are already overweight get back on track to living a healthy lifestyle. This program could be held at the local YMCA, Boys and Girls Club or other community organization.


