

FIT NOT FAT

A NEW APPROACH TO OBESITY FOR HEALTH JOURNALISM

Health journalism is a complicated beat. The science is easy to get wrong, and the tone and tenor of the reporting needs careful attention. Coverage of obesity is even more fraught. Early insights from an on-going research project by the Discovery Centre for Health Journalism suggests that not only is most journalism about obesity not helping – some reporting may inadvertently be making the situation worse. This needs to change. There is too much at stake for journalism about food, fat and fitness to be anything less than impactful and effective.

By Harry Dugmore

HEALTH
JOURNALISM

At issue is that more and more people are putting on weight each year, in South Africa and globally, and that the media is deeply implicated in the rise in national average weights.¹ The consequences of obesity at an epidemiological level – across national and global populations – are severe: steep raises in rates of heart diseases, and a new epidemic of diabetes². Cancers influenced by excess weight are rising quickly. South Africans over 50 years of age, according to the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, ‘have the highest rates of high blood pressure for any country, at any time in history’³ and the rates of strokes are going up.

What obesity is, in medical terms, is of course a controversial issue. As human rights and fat activists correctly point out, we risk pathologising a ‘normal’ range of human sizes and shapes, as well as running roughshod over cultural mores and differences. Critics suggest journalists are contributing to the ridicule and stigma that people who don’t conform to the medical body mass index (BMI) weight range standards are often subjected to.

These are real concerns. At the same time, media audiences are clamouring for information and knowledge, giving local sports scientist Tim Noakes rock star status and sending his high fat, low carbs Banting diet to the top of the South African best seller lists. There is clearly a demand for good journalism and there is clearly, too, a genuine epidemic of danger especially for the very obese (those whose BMIs are over 35). How can this be done with less ‘othering’ of fat people in every day social spaces, and in the media? How can journalism make a difference?

Is journalism part of the problem?

Drawing initially on articles that appeared in the five top-selling magazines in SA between 2011 and 2013, a key critique emerging out of our research is that journalism on obesity mostly encourages a culture of dieting. Few articles promote weight loss approaches that are not diet-centric.

Why is this important? First, there is good evidence that dieting just doesn’t work⁴. Out of every 100 people who actually lose weight from dieting (and disregarding many who do not) a staggering 90 to 95 of those put all the lost weight back on within five years. Indeed most people regain their lost weight after two years.

The consequences of this are not benign. Regaining lost weight and weight fluctuations are strongly correlated with poorer lifetime health. And, worse, most people don’t just put on the lost weight: they put on more kilograms than they lost. Human physiology, honed over millions of years of evolution, has powerful mechanisms to reverse weight loss and, fearing future famines, helps us add an extra protective layer almost every time we regain lost weight. Dieting, ironically and tragically, is a major cause of lifetime weight gain.

But much of the local media is locked into stories about rapid weight loss and diet. “Lose 12kgs by Christmas” is always going to attract more attention than a piece of journalism that implies a long, and frankly difficult, lifestyle adjustment. Editors often don’t want these kinds of ‘downer’ stories, and readers are often looking for the most convenient solutions. But these quick fixes are usually no fix at all – for far too many people, dieting is just a cycle of weight



GRILLO'S ROADHOUSE - BENONI: from the series Life under Democracy - Dale Yudelman

loss, weight gain, often coupled with some anxiety and depression, as the weight returns with interest.

Ultimately a focus on dieting in the media may help contribute to ill health. And it is certainly not helping people who want to lose weight in a sustainable way.

It is worth noting that beyond journalism, the media more generally is also deeply implicated in the problems of rising obesity rates. Big food and drink companies like Coke and MacDonald's have some of the largest advertising budgets of any companies in the world. Cigarette ads used to provide newspaper, TV and radio and especially magazines with a big portion of their profits, but the media industry survived their banning in SA and in many countries around the world. But any restriction on fast food or sugary drinks advertising – the reduction of consumption of which would have *as big an impact* on national health as the ban on smoking – would probably send most of the current media into a financial tailspin.

Such bans are not going to happen soon.

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different approach? One that doesn't focus on dieting and quick fixes, and the diet *du jour*?

What would such journalism look like? How can journalists do a better job of 'doing no harm' as the Hippocratic oaths implores medical professionals – and by extension – health journalists, to do?

The solution, our research is suggesting, is for journalists to spend a great deal more time focusing on fitness and far less time focusing on fat. Indeed, this is probably the only ethical way forward for journalists writing about human weight/obesity/health. Doing careful journalism highlighting the frequent new studies about the benefits of *even a little bit of exercise* has the potential to help people lead far healthier lives.

Globally, there is a strong argument that health communicators, health journalists, and public health campaigns should all start moving away from a focus on weight loss, primarily because a focus on fitness is much more likely to lead to sustainable weight loss than our current diet-centric journalism.

For many, this might not seem like such a big shift. But it is. At a basic level it is a question of sequencing and emphasis – focus on getting fit first, and let changes

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in nutritional intake follow. But it does more than that. As journalists, we need to start avoiding stories that foreground body image and weight as *the* issue, or even as a key issue. If we do this, and if our journalism inspires action (it often doesn't, but that is another set of problems) there is powerful evidence that as people get fitter, they are more amenable to the idea of modifying their food choices away from sugar and refined foods and towards healthier options.

Fitness is a gateway to more sustainable lifestyle changes that can include some focus on weight loss. We now know that as little as 20 to 30 minutes of additional moderate exercise such as walking, four or five days a week, even if it is accumulated in short bursts, reduces health risks. Getting even fitter – doing 45 minutes to an hour a day of moderate exercise, at any weight and age, will (on average) add years to your life⁵.

The new science on short bursts of exercise being equal to one long stretch has surprised many, but made it possible for people of all sizes to do a bit here and there – and have it all accumulate physiologically. There are dozen of angles for journalists as this science and the science of fitness advances rapidly.

For example, new research shows the best predictor of lowering your risk for heart disease, is how long it takes you to run a mile (1.6km)⁶. Yes, waistline size is also a good indicator of longevity at most ages, but fitness is the best way to modify the body's basic physiology and kick start broader lifestyle changes that actually add years to life (and some would say, life to years!)

There is no doubt that these modifications should, over time, for most people, also include some dietary modification, but when this happens as an organic part of a fitness programme, rather than on its own, all the evidence suggest people get more sustainable results. And sustainability is the absolute key to long-term health.

In a brilliant new book *The First 20 minutes – the surprising science of how we can exercise better, train smarter and live longer* (Icon Books, 2013) that synthesises

hundreds of recent research articles, Gretchen Reynolds concludes “a growing body of science suggests that aerobic (ie cardiovascular) fitness may be the single most important determinant of how long you live, trumping whether you smoke or are obese”.

The book also explodes decades-held myths about exercise, and shows how a good combination of cardio and strength exercise (including high intensity interval training) can allow everyone to significantly reduce their lifetime health risks.

Every health journalist should read Reynolds' book (it is also a master class in science writing). And so should anyone who wants to improve his or her health through an exercise-centric regime.

Shifting the focus from “lose weight” to “get fit” is a prescription for public health systems in general, and should be the core of future public health awareness campaigns. These campaigns are pitifully scarce in South Africa – through their absence, journalists and the media have become the *de facto* public space for any discussion about healthy lifestyles. While journalists should not be expected to be health campaigners, when no one else is doing anything significant about weight loss, that is what we become.

If we could shift the locus of our stories to promoting movement, by describing for example the joy of a long walk, the fun of restarting competitive sports in adulthood (over 50s soccer leagues, Tai Chi and yoga groups for 70 plus are breaking out all over the world but are slower to get off the ground in Africa), our journalism is more likely to do some good. The time has come for those of us in the media and journalism education to acknowledge that the fat-centric articles, with their diets-are-the-answer approach has failed. Focusing on fitness instead will allow journalists to do much less harm. If we could stop making people feel bad about their bodies, their body image, and their weight, and get intrigued about inexpensive and accessible exercise, like walking more, we can be part of a longer-term solution to the global obesity epidemic.



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Endnotes

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