

NAAFA Newsletter

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NEWS AND COMMENT

GENETIC FACTORS DECLARED LEADING CAUSE OF OBESITY BY RESEARCH GROUP

An important new study has just been published that indicates that heredity may play the primary role in obesity, whereas family environment during childhood may have little or no effect at all.

In a paper published in the New England Journal of Medicine (Vol.314, 1/23/86, p.193-8), Dr. Albert J. Stunkard and his associates at the University of Pennsylvania, the Psykologisk Institut in Copenhagen, and the University of Texas wrote about "An Adoption Study of Human Obesity" in which they concluded that "genetic influences have an important role in determining human fatness in adults, whereas the family environment alone has no apparent effect." The study cited previous "twin" and "adoption" studies, finding some disagreement between those studies, and set out to settle the question once and for all.

In the final portion of the paper, its authors addressed the question of how the findings related to the prevention of obesity. They found that the main advantage of knowing the important role played by genetics is that it "allows better informed programs of prevention..." such as diet and exercise. The authors stated that prevention of obesity "...need not be confined to dietary measures. Increased physical activity is useful in the control of human obesity."

ADOPTION STUDY RECEIVES WIDE PUBLICITY

The study described above has been widely publicized, probably because its findings are at odds with much public opinion. Headlines around the country displayed the special leanings of the various publications in which they appeared. The NEW YORK TIMES (1/23/86) proclaimed "FAT OR FIT? STUDY MAY CONFIRM SUSPICIONS IT IS IN THE GENES" and had a subtitle in the article "A warning, Not an Excuse". USA TODAY on the same day headlined "FAT OR THIN? WE ARE BORN THAT WAY--But Dieting Can Help". Long Island's NEWSDAY said "JEAN SIZE DEPENDS ON GENE SIZE: STUDY". The New York DAILY NEWS proclaimed "FAT CHANCE FOR YOU IF PARENTS OBESE--Like Blubber, Like Son, a Study Reveals". Most articles emphasized that those who are obese due to who their parents were should not feel that they have no control over their weight. In an interview quoted by the Associated Press, Dr. Stunkard said that the study helps to explain why it's more difficult for some people than for others to keep their weight down and has implications for child rearing: Overweight parents, for instance, may want to make more of an effort to control their youngster's eating, he said.

COMMENTARY

The study by Dr. Stunkard and his associates does indeed confirm suspicions that many NAAFA's have had--at least, those who have been fat since childhood. (Of course, it's possible that genes could also program at what point after childhood you might become fat!) His study would seem to let a lot of us "off the hook" about blaming ourselves for being fat.

However, the study's authors might have been on firmer ground if they had avoided commenting on how obesity can be prevented. Actually, the paper devoted only one paragraph to remarks about dieting and exercise--but you'd never know that by reading the headlines. And take a headline like "FAT OR FIT". Obviously the TIMES feels that you have to choose one or the other, but not both. Or the one that said "A Warning, Not an Excuse". Why is an "excuse" needed for what appears to be a perfectly normal human condition for some people? "Dieting can Help": Whoever wrote that one never looked at the statistics. If they had, they would have written: "Extreme Dieting (the kind that people really do) Can Help Make You Fatter in the Long Run". Or take that one about "Like Blubber, Like Son." Spare us...

As for Dr. Stunkard's well-intentioned suggestion that parents might want to control their children's eating--control which to many parents means taking drastic measures--NAAFA's largest members all seem to have parents who felt they were justified in "controlling" their children's eating, to no avail. The only thing children lose, under those circumstances, is love for their parents and respect for themselves. That's a high price to pay for trying to be thin, especially since it usually ends in failure. How about love and respect for children, regardless of their size? ■

THE SHARON RUSSELL CASE--NURSING STUDENT EXPLAINS HER LAWSUIT AGAINST COLLEGE

(In the 12/85 issue of this Newsletter, a front-page news item told how Sharon Russell, a former student at Salve Regina College (RI), had filed suit against the college, claiming violation of privacy, illegally denial of an education, and violation of her civil rights. Since that time, Ms. Russell and her attorneys have consented to discuss the case with us, and we have also received some comments by the law firm representing the college. What follows are some of our questions and her answers, taken from an interview on February 1, with a few comments by attorneys on both sides, taken on January 31.--Ed.)

Q: The attorney for the college, Mr. Snow, says that you voluntarily entered into an agreement in your junior year to lose weight at the rate of two pounds per week, for a total of 100 pounds, or withdraw from the nursing program, and that you violated the agreement by not losing weight fast enough. One of your attorneys, Mr. Hogan, says that the agreement was not valid, partly because you were being harassed by school officials and faculty, and were under extreme pressure to satisfy their demands at the time that you signed it. What kind of harassment were you receiving?

A: I often felt degraded. For example, a faculty member, a nurse, said that I should be able to lose five pounds a week, at times that I was only losing a half a pound or one pound a week. Faculty members yelled at me about losing weight. In front of my fellow students (and with no advance notice) I was used as a model in showing the class how to make the bed of an obese person, and how to make an injection in the arm of an obese person.

Q: How was your progress with weight loss to be reported to the school? Mr. Snow says that you agreed to present a Weight Watchers weigh-in card to a neutral party, a school staff secretary, once a week. How did that work out?

A: The secretary would look at my card and decide whether my progress was acceptable. When it was not, she would remind me that I wasn't living up to my agreement.

Q: How close did you come to satisfying the school's requirements? Mr. Snow says that you had some health complications that, combined with your attitude toward dieting, became of greater concern to the school than the weight itself.

A: I joined Weight Watchers and lost some weight, but not always at the two pound rate that the school required. I had trouble sleeping, I was irritable, I frequently had headaches and gastrointestinal distress. I blame it on the diet and on the tension I was under.

Q: What did they say when you didn't lose weight fast enough for them?

A: They said that I was just making excuses, and that I wasn't dedicated enough to be a nurse. Because of this, I wanted to show them that my weight would not prevent me from being a good nurse. I maintained a grade point average of 3.0 (out of 4.0) or better most of the time, and it rose to 3.5 while I was under the additional pressure during my junior year.

Q: Mr. Snow says that you would have been allowed to complete a final year and graduate, but not in the nursing program, as per your agreement. When did you decide that you should take the school to court?

A: During my junior year, when I went to talk to the Vice-President of the college, she told me that she was aware of what was going on, and that, while she didn't agree with the treatment I was receiving from some staff members, she agreed with the school's ultimate goal, to make sure that I lost weight. When I received the letter last August that said that I was in violation of my agreement, and that I had therefore voluntarily withdrawn from the nursing program at Salve, I told my parents what had been going on, and I and my mother went to see school officials. I was told, in front of my mother, that as a nursing student, I represented the college in the community and that at my size, I didn't fit the image of the college. Now they are denying that image was a factor in their decision to enforce the agreement.

My response was, that they couldn't do this to a person. I decided to fight it. It was effecting me as an individual. I wondered how they can play God with me--I'm a worthwhile human being! I did well academically and I had a right to graduate with the other students; I could be as good a nurse as they could.

Q: You mentioned that you didn't tell your parents until last summer. Were you ever able to discuss these problems with anyone else?

A: I didn't tell my parents about it because I was far from home and didn't want to worry them. I did not discuss it with many people because it was very personal, and I like to take care of my problems on my own. I did receive support from a couple of friends and a counselor on campus who was very understanding, and who spoke to school officials about me, but apparently with no effect.

Q: How do you feel now about dieting and weight loss?

A: Dieting has been a constant struggle since I was five years old. I hope now to concentrate on maintaining (stabilizing) my weight, at least for a while. I would still like to lose weight, but at my own speed, without pressure from anyone.

Q: Did anyone ever suggest weight-loss surgery to you?

A: Do you mean, stomach stapling? No. And if they did, I would not consider such a drastic procedure--my mother is a nurse, and we both feel that it is medically unsound, for various reasons.

Q: Did you ever hear of NAAFA before Mr. Hogan told you about our request for an interview?

A: Recently, after some publicity, a woman from Massachusetts called me, saying that she is a NAAFA member, and that I should write to you. She was quite supportive.

After the interview, Ms. Russell seemed grateful to hear of NAAFA's interest in her case, and stated that she looks forward to receiving literature describing NAAFA and its activities.

COMMENTARY

We appreciate the good faith demonstrated by Mr. Snow, the college's attorney, and by Mr. Hogan, representing Ms. Russell, in speaking to us openly about the lawsuit. We never automatically side with fat parties to a lawsuit, because there are often factors which dictate caution before NAAFA takes sides. For example, in another case in Rhode Island, a fat woman who sued to get her job back turned out to be incompetent, with a bad attendance record.

But after hearing both sides, our sympathies and support must clearly lie with Ms. Russell. This seems to be just another case of the type that we have been hearing about for years. A fat college student studying for one of the health professions is often told that he or she does not "fit the image" of the college, and is not "disciplined enough" to befit the profession; or that he or she will not serve as a good "health example" for hospital patients. How many lives of people have been saved by fat nurses or doctors who would not have entered the profession if they had caved in to the kind of discrimination described in the interview above? How many health professionals are stigmatized after graduation by their peers and their institutions because of their weight?

Is Salve Regina College correct in perceiving a stigma in the community against obese nurses, and if so, since they pride themselves in having a first-class nursing school, shouldn't they take the lead, and declare that image is secondary to nursing performance? How about paying more attention to current research findings, which point to a strong relationship between heredity and obesity, and a strong relationship between ill health and yo-yo dieting?

Ms. Russell has been able to transfer to another nursing school, but will graduate a year behind her Salve classmates, wasting time, money, and energy in the process. We wish her well in her endeavors, and admire her courage in holding the college accountable for its actions... --WJF ■

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COB'S CORNER...by William J. Fabrey, Chairman of the Board

SHOULD WE PANIC IF ANOTHER GROUP ADOPTS A NAME SIMILAR TO OURS?

I'm referring to a new organization that has received a splash of publicity lately: The National Association For AIDS Awareness (NAFAA), based in West Los Angeles, California. The group apparently pronounces their acronym NAFAA the same way many NAAFAn pronounce our acronym. According to the 1/30/86 edition of the Westchester-Landera (CA) Observer, supplied by NAAFAn Jane Terry, NAFAA is a for-profit company that says it plans to set up a nationwide chain of AIDS antibody testing centers, and will supply an identification card to those who test negative, with updates every three months for \$45 each time. The newspaper also said that a co-owner of NAFAA, Lawrence Berry, was sued last year by the California State Attorney General for allegedly participating in a fraudulent telephone credit card operation.

I don't believe that we have any legal recourse when another group's acronym "sounds like" ours. Instead, I suggest we adopt a wait-and-see attitude. The company may not even get off the ground nationally. It may not come to be known by its acronym. It may be edged out by a competitor. We may be changing our name anyway (see debates in past **Newsletters**.) Let's not panic, folks...

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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR:...by Nancy Summer

Good news! This is the third issue with our new monthly format and we have received a number of letters from NAAFANS who are pleased with the new frequency. Bad news! We have had to hold up on printing many good articles due to our current budget limitations of four pages per issue. (If you have submitted material, please hold on; we are looking for ways to share your thoughts with your fellow NAAFANS.) Columns like PEOPLE NEWS have been delayed as well. In our next issue we will catch up on all the milestones of our members. If you have news to share, please get it to us before Feb. 28th.

By now you may have noticed that there are two extra pages in this issue. Member Sue Waller (MD) has made a generous donation to pay for the printing of four extra pages. We have chosen to split her donation into two issues, so you'll be receiving a six page **Newsletter** next month too! Thank you Sue, and thanks to other members like June Bailey who have also made donations to the **Newsletter**. ■

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MEDIA AND PUBLICITY WATCH

NAAFA was mentioned in Dr. Art Ulene's column the first week of January, in newspapers across the country. As a result, orders have been received for Dr. Paul Ernsberger's Report on Weight-Loss Surgery.

Three NAAFA men (Blickenstorfer, Dachis, and Fabrey) appeared on the Sally Jessy Raphael show, broadcast in 66 cities in January and early February (see Newsletter, Jan. 1986). The show, about men who admire fat women, was positive, with the hostess and the audience being mostly supportive. One NAAFAN, Louise Wolfe (CA), suggested that the show would have had more balance if one of the F.A.'s had been fat. However, a fat F.A. had been offered to the show, and he was not chosen to appear. The show's reasoning was that the public assumes that fat men marry fat women, and the presence of a fat F.A. would only reinforce stereotypes!

On Jan. 28, NAAFAN Kitty Brown (NY) appeared on New York's Channel 31, WNYC, in a 15-minute interview of what it is like to be a fat woman--and the benefits of NAAFA membership.

BUF magazine reports that mail was received from men wanting NAAFA's address, which was supplied to them. (NAAFA does not advertise in BUF or GENI nor solicit publicity there, but has been mentioned in those magazines on various occasions.)

Two NAAFA couples appeared on Jan. 24 on the People are Talking TV show in Philadelphia: Paula and Neil Dachis (MD), and Aglaia Koras-Bain and Bob Bain (NY). New York large-size model agency owner Mary Duffy was also on the show, as was Nancy Roberts, author of Breaking all the Rules, a new book about giving up dieting.

A new magazine to compete with BBW has been mentioned in several recent news stories in the media. The new magazine may either be named "Allure" or "The Allure Woman". Meanwhile, a new magazine for big and tall men stressing fashions and lifestyles has been introduced: MAGNA asks for a subscription price of \$12.00 for four quarterly issues, and is located at PO Box 286, Cabin John, MD 20818. Their second issue appeared in winter, 1985; one feature story was about the famous Cajun chef, Paul Prudhomme, an undeniably fat man. Their Spring, 1986 issue is now for sale at some newsstands.

A TIME magazine cover story (Jan. 20) titled "Slimming Down" promised to provide "new insights into why it's so tough to win at staying thin." NAAFANS who started to read the piece expected a good article until they encountered flip expressions like "unsightly fat", "bloat towards chubbiness", "togs for hogs", "blimp up" and other comments interspersed with the supposedly serious coverage, which concluded that "in losing weight...mind over body is very much within the realm of possibility. Ready, forget that set point, and go for it." Illustrations for the article were more suitable for a grade-school health primer. One NAAFAN commented that he had seen better writing in the National Enquirer...

A cover story in the NEWSDAY MAGAZINE (SUNDAY, 2/9) discussed "The Battle of the Bulge: Is it Hopeless?" The article was unusually extensive quoting dozens of people, including NAAFANS Kitty Brown, Dr. Paul Ernsberger, Ira Shprintzen, and Nancy Summer. However, it arrived at no definite conclusions, and said nothing about the recent findings about heredity and obesity.

NOW IN PREPARATION - Chairman Fabrey and other NAAFANS were interviewed by American Demographics magazine for an upcoming article about marketing products to fat people. An article about NAAFA is slated for the April issue of EBONY magazine, aimed primarily at a black readership. NAAFA is cooperating with a series of reports being prepared for NBC television news locally in New York City, on the problem of diets, exercise, and weight loss to appear the last week in February. NAAFA was interviewed for an article to be carried soon in Chocolate Singles. NAAFA member Janet Schulman, who manufactures the Briana line of large-size lingerie, is slated to be on the Sally Jessy Raphael show, live in St. Louis on Feb. 18, and to be shown in 65 other cities on the Tuesdays or Wednesdays for up to 4 weeks thereafter. And, a NAAFA group is scheduled to appear on AM Philadelphia on February 27.

The March issue of Vogue magazine will include a pull-out supplement of what they call "large-size" fashions. This may be a first for Vogue, which has a long history of opposition to the inclusion of large sizes in the world of fashion. One very sour note, if true: The emphasis in the supplement may be in the size range 10-12! We'll see... Dr. Ernsberger has been interviewed for an article in an upcoming issue of Parade magazine, a Sunday newspaper supplement with a circulation of several million. ■

BOARD ELECTS NEW OFFICERS

At its Jan. 18 meeting, NAAFA's Board of Directors elected officers to a new one-year term through December, 1986. William Fabrey was asked to continue as Chairman of the Board. Eileen M. Lefebure, formerly NAAFA's Secretary, was elected President. Conrad Blickenstorfer was chosen to be Vice-President, and Nancy Summer was elected to continue as Treasurer. The position of Secretary remained temporarily unfilled.

Former President Paula Dachis and Vice-Pres. Elisabeth Williams retained their Board seats. (Unlike officerships, Board seats carry terms of three years, and are filled by NAAFans who are elected by the general NAAFA membership.) Others on the eight-member Board include Jerry Hoxworth and Russell F. Williams.

CAMPAIGN '85 SUCCESSFUL FUNDRAISER

The generosity of more than 40 NAAFA members and non-members helped to make last year's fund drive a success. According to Bunny Peckham, Chairperson of the Fundraising Committee, more than \$2,000 in cash donations and monthly pledges were received between May and December, 1985, in response to a donor form sent to NAAFA-Gram recipients in May, 1985, and a similar form sent to all members in October. The following list includes most of those who contributed. (Those donors who declined to receive the committee's public thank you were not listed, but NAAFA is grateful for their support in any case.) Further donations to the campaign will be credited to the 1986 drive, and the names of donors will be published on a list like the following:

HONOR ROLL (\$100 or more)

- | | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| June Bailey (OH) | William J. Fabrey (NY) | Lillian Nielsen (IL) |
| Conrad Blickensdorfer (NY) | Linda Gehres (OH) | Susan Tenzer, M.A., CCMHC (PA) |
| Lenard Brechner (NY) | Ruby Greenwald (NY) | Lois E. Tressler (FL) |
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SUPPORTERS (\$25 or more)

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Trisha Barder (PA) | Jane D. Kettell (MA) | Harvey Parker (NY) |
| Anna Cannizzaro (NY) | Toni McBain (CA) | Jeanette Ramseur (NY) |
| Carol L. Dunlap, M.D. (OH) | Barbara E. Novack (MD) | Marilyn Rock (MI) |
| Nancy E. Fleischmann (NY) | John Pertino (MD) | Noelle E. Sewell (PA) |
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| Robbie Kassell (NY) | B. Neil Osbourn (NY) | Michael Witty (CT) |

DONORS (\$5 or more)

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Jeanette L. Apprill (NM) | Dave Latham (NY) | Dorothy Schiavo (NY) |
| Lloyd Ingram (NY) | Jo Powers (CA) | Peggy Ventura (NJ) |
| Capt. Alex Kennedy (Canada) | | |

GIFTS IN MEMORIAM

Included in the above listings were gifts that were made in memoriam for John M. Fabrey and Wilma Kuns.

NAAFADVICE...by June Bailey

Dear NAAFAdvice,

All my life I've been left out of things because I'm fat. Now, when I attend NAAFA events, I still feel like I'm being left out. What's happening?

signed, Never in the "in" crowd

Dear Left Out,

Maybe you're feeling rejected because that's exactly what you expect will happen. Often, what's really happening is that you're staring opportunity in the eye and not taking advantage of it. NAAFA may be a very different setting from what you have come to expect in organizations. We're generally an accepting group and "in" crowds as you have known them should have no place here. What you may perceive as an "in" crowd may simply be people who tend to associate with each other because of the NAAFA volunteer work they have in common.

Try this. Volunteer to do something, no matter how insignificant it may seem. You'll get plenty of attention and before long you'll feel more accepted. Eventually, if you stay active, there may be new people thinking that you're in the "in" crowd. But you'll know better, and it will be your turn to offer this same advice to them! ■

Q: Do you have any information on the gastric balloon? A doctor here in Cleveland has gone on the radio to promote this weight-loss technique, which involves swallowing a balloon which is then inflated to cause a "feeling of fullness". He said there was no guarantee of permanent weight loss, that the procedure causes ulcers in 1% of the patients, and in one case the balloon "migrated to the small bowel". He does the operation on people who are as little as 20% over insurance chart weight. How much testing was done before the FDA approved this?--June Bailey (OH)

A: The gastric balloon operates on the same principle as gastric stapling; both limit the stomach's capacity to store food and thus force the patient to eat smaller meals. Not long ago a medical supply company contacted me to ask my opinion of the "balloon diet" (the company was considering marketing balloons). I replied that the balloon did have several advantages over stapling. There would be no risks from surgery or cutting into the stomach, such as leaks of stomach fluid. Also, the balloon can always be taken out, while stapling is permanent.

On the other hand, the balloon may cause some of the same long-term complications as stapling, which occur mainly because of interference with the normal function of the stomach to liquify food and begin the process of digestion, resulting in malnutrition. The presence of a large foreign object in the stomach will undoubtedly get in the way of its normal functions.

Unlike intestinal bypass and gastric stapling, the balloon was tested in animals before it was widely used in humans. A team of scientists from the University of Heidelberg placed balloons in the stomachs of lab rats and did autopsies four months later (1). The stomach adapted to the presence of the balloon by expanding and doubling in weight. (After staple surgery, the stomach also adapts by expanding, and this is the major cause of weight regain after the operation.) There was also an increase in the acid-producing capacity of the stomach, which could lead to ulcers. I interviewed Maryland physician Lloyd Garren, M.D., who developed the balloon that recently won FDA approval. Garren implanted balloons in 70 patients for six months; during that time five ulcers resulted (2). Normally, ulcers are less common in fat people than in thin people (3).

The greatest danger is that the balloon can partially deflate and lodge in the small intestine, blocking the passage of food (1,2,4,5). Intestinal obstruction is serious and potentially fatal. Medical reports of cases where people have had various foreign objects lodged in their stomachs have revealed many serious consequences: Intestinal obstruction (10-26% of cases), ulcers (10-24%), and even death (10-19%) (6). Scientists at the University of Heidelberg believe that many of these problems could develop in fat people with balloons in their stomachs (1).

Dr. Garren claims an average weight loss of 40 lbs. after six months (2). However, Drs. Kruss and Livak of the Hines, Illinois Veteran's Hospital tried to duplicate Garren's results and found only small, transient weight losses (5). They concluded that Garren's program of diet counseling, behavior modification, and frequent office visits were responsible for his patients' weight loss, while the balloon was irrelevant. Kruss and Livak also found that most patients experienced nausea and diarrhea for two days after balloon insertion, and 13% of the patients developed ulcers.

An animal study has showed that weight is quickly regained if the balloon becomes deflated (7). Dr. Garren has so far only followed people for seven months after removal of the balloon. No doubt the enlarged stomach resulting from the balloon (1,7) will speed the regain of weight. Chances are good that the lost poundage will return, just as it does after fasting or jaw-wiring.

In summary, the gastric balloon is probably safer than any form of weight-loss surgery. However, the best approach remains a balanced, varied diet combined with exercise for gradual and permanent weight loss.

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Some NAAFAs have been posing the following question: Since weight-loss surgery is risky and often ineffective, and most diets seem doomed to failure, what can someone do who seems to gain weight indefinitely, apparently without ever arriving at a setpoint? Dr. Ernsberger will write about "Resetting Your Setpoint" in a series of articles in upcoming *Newsletters* beginning with the March issue.--Ed.