**The silent pandemic**

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Although it is difficult to believe, in a country where around 50 percent of children are stunted or unable to reach the expected height for the age, obesity is also a growing problem among children and young people. According to the Pakistan Health Commission, 11 percent of children in the country are overweight while five percent are obese, or in other words, morbidly overweight, putting them at risk of serious disease or death.

This situation is not unique to children alone. Twenty-five percent of the Pakistani population according to the WHO and other research bodies is overweight with women aged 35-54 years making up 42.8 percent of overweight persons. But in a more shocking finding, 15-24 percent of youngsters, made up of 12 percent of men and 13.8 percent of women are also seriously overweight or on the list of obesity measured according to the body-mass indexes put out by global bodies. This is true to an even greater extent when the criterion for Asians is brought into play, based on body build.

It is therefore no surprise that Pakistan now has one of the highest rates of diabetes, heart disease and hypertension in the world. Experts who have been studying the problem, in a country where the focus so far has been on the vast number of malnourished people who live amongst us, note that dietary patterns, a sedentary lifestyle and a lack of exercise are among the main factors, which lead to children and young people falling into the overweight or even obese category. This is far higher than is the case in many developed countries where there is greater awareness about the risk of being overweight, and about the need to eat a healthy diet.

As talk grows across the country about the Health Card scheme and the potential benefits it could bring people who need in-patient care in hospitals, our health experts and health ministry should also be focusing on the factors which lead to people becoming unhealthy and falling into patterns, which endanger their lives. Creating greater awareness about this could save a large number of people and allow them to live a healthier and happier life. Yet we have a situation where schools say that parents are reluctant to allow for lessons including physical activity, or sport, because they believe that this is essentially a waste of time, and that only academics is of any significance.

Perhaps they don’t think that if a graduate who has gained straight As throughout his or her life is to fall seriously ill by the age of 40, because of the lack of exercise, there is little point in getting these grades. That person will, out of necessity, be devoting the rest of his life to his or her health issues.

We cannot ignore this problem. Doctors claim that obesity and serious weight issues possibly caused more deaths than Covid-19 over the last three or four years in Pakistan since a detailed national nutritional survey was conducted in 2018 by the National Health Services Forum in Islamabad. The issue also is of what we encourage people to do and the many facilities to make this possible. As more and more parks are taken over in Karachi and also other larger cities for development purposes, young people and children have less place in which to exercise or run about or engage in various sports. In some of Lahore’s parks run by housing authorities, sports such as badminton and cricket are forbidden. While this makes a limited amount of sense, given the hazard an unruly game of cricket could present to persons engaged in books or other less active exercise, the sports facilities available at clubs need to be made more attainable for those who lack the money to pay the fees currently demanded.

In fact, we need a complete change in lifestyle if we are to keep people healthy, safe and able to live a natural lifespan. We are among the developing countries falling short of this and rank among the nations which have the highest state of obese and overweight people among developing countries in the world and even among the entire list of countries measured for these factors.

One of the problems could be the promotion of unhealthy food and its direct marketing to young people. Junk food has become a new fad and we have given up traditional foods, which once consisted of snacks after school or at other times of the day, such as roasted corn on the cob or cleanly prepared items such as ‘dhai bhalas’. Fruit of course is now so expensive, it is impossible for many to consider buying it. The few who do, do not consume enough of it, and instead favour food laden with carbs or deeply fried food such as burgers and chips. Soft drinks add a further problem to the nature of things and very few children up to the age of 18 get the one-off exercise each day recommended by the American Academy of Paediatricians as essential to their wellbeing and health.

In many schools, there is no space for such exercise and even in those where space exists, there is very little encouragement for it, either by staff or by parents. Of course, there are exceptions and these stand out and are well known in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. But we must also remember that most of our children go to schools which are located in small bungalows, which were intended to serve a residential purpose and were not designed as schools with campuses large enough to cater to the physical needs of young people.

It is also interesting that the category between 35 and 44 years among women is considered amongst the fittest in terms of global figures. The reasons for obesity among this group in our country, and for so much of this population being seriously overweight again lies in a lack of fitness and a lack of facilities for women from less wealthy backgrounds to access and visit easily. Instead, we have more and more screen time and less and less physical activity. Whereas people used to visit parks in the past more regularly for picnics, for walks, for informal games of football, badminton or cricket and for other pursuits, many are now glued to the computer screens or else to the television.

The issue is not one merely of how we live or what we do. A campaign has to be begun, as was done for the Covid-19 pandemic, to deal with the silent killer, which is destroying lives and taking away choices from people. We must consider what is marketed to children and whether it is ethical to allow vast advertising for biscuits and candies on a daily basis on the screens. There needs to be much greater attention to this problem so that we can move forward as a healthy nation and learn to enjoy the benefits of good health rather than falling into patterns of illness, which have become more and more common in our country.

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