



## You Don't Have to LOSE to WIN Deconstructing HBO's *Weight of the Nation*

In collaboration with the Institute of Medicine (IOM), the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), HBO purports to have gathered the facts and lined up the experts to present “one of the most far-reaching public health campaigns” to date on “obesity.” Their documentary, *Weight of the Nation* (WOTN), is scheduled to air on May 14 and 15, 2012. But one should rightly ask, “Are the many healthy fat people going to be represented?” and “Why were the experts on the evidence-based Health At Every Size® approach not consulted?” Sadly, it is very likely that this upcoming WOTN documentary will be yet another example of the “ways in which bias and convention interfere with robust scientific reasoning.”[1] The following descriptions of the four segments of the documentary are drawn from HBO’s press release about the documentary.

### Part One: Consequences

In part one, *Consequences*, the focus of WOTN will be on the “scope” and “serious health consequences” of our nation’s burgeoning weight. The central claim is that we are in the midst of an ‘epidemic’ of obesity. This premise in itself is unsound, as it “implies an exponential pattern of growth typical of epidemics. The available data do not support this claim. Instead, what we have seen, in the US, is a relatively modest rightward skewing of average weight on the distribution curve, with people of lower weights gaining little or no weight, and the majority of people weighing 3-5 kg [6-11 lbs.] more than they did a generation ago.”[2,3] Moreover, the most recent data indicates that the increase in BMI has leveled off among both adults and children over the past decade.[4,5]

Furthermore, BMI is the measure by which “obesity” is defined, when in fact BMI is a “very poor predictor of disease and longevity.”[6,7,8,9,10] Many people are not aware that in 1998 “it was the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (part of the National Institutes of Health) that changed the definition of overweight and obesity, and an additional 30.5 million people in the US became overweight with the stroke of a pen. This represented a 43% increase.”[11] The value of lowering the BMI categories was not supported by the limited data they provided.[11,12]

### Part Two: Choices

The second part of the series is *Choices*, which promises to present “what science has shown about how to lose weight and maintain weight loss.” Given the tagline for WOTN, which is “To Win, We have to LOSE” it seems clear that this show’s content will support

the notion that one can lose weight and keep it off. This is a notion that is NOT supported by the scientific literature. “Long-term follow-up studies document that the majority of individuals regain virtually all of the weight that was lost during treatment, regardless of whether they maintain their diet or exercise program.”[1] Perhaps the NIH, one of HBO’s partner organizations in producing WOTN, has forgotten that it was their expert panel that documented that “one third to two thirds of the weight is regained within one year [after weight loss], and almost all is regained within five years.”[13]

Continuing to promote the strategy of weight loss when its long term ineffectiveness has been well documented, might well be considered “malpractice” on the part of those identifying themselves as health providers, and certainly leads to the conclusion that we need to address the “ethical implications of recommending treatment that may be ineffective or damaging.”[1]

### **Part Three: Children in Crisis**

In part three, *Children in Crisis*, we will be presented with “individual stories of how obesity is damaging our children.” ASDAH is concerned that this may be one of the potentially most harmful sections of the documentary. “Singling out larger children and youth for weight-related interventions increases both anxiety for the child and stigmatization, prejudice, and harassment towards the child.”[14,15,16] In a world where “81% of 10-year-olds admit to dieting, binge eating, or a fear of getting fat, and we are now seeing eating disorders in children as young as five,”[17] we should be not be framing public health messages in the stigma-supporting frame of “childhood obesity.” The Health At Every Size® professionals could well produce “individual stories” of both HEALTHY fat children and children directly damaged by obesity-focused interventions. The true “crisis” our nation is facing is that these efforts that identify children as having “weight problems”, send home BMI Report Cards, and designate foods as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ combine to “threaten to do irreparable damage to both the physiological and psychological health of our children.”[18]

### **Part Four: Challenges**

We are sincerely hopeful that the last section of this documentary, *Challenges*, truly will focus on changing our “social and built environment” without “stigmatizing or unfairly judging anyone” as Dr. William Dietz of the CDC stated in a letter response to an ASDAH member. Increasing access to affordable nutritious foods, safe play spaces for children, and neighborhoods that make walking and biking a reasonable and safe option, and eliminating stigma, discrimination, and their resultant stress (which is known to contribute to poor health outcomes), are consistent with the HAES<sup>SM</sup> approach. If these changes are framed in terms of “winning the war on obesity,” however, they remain discriminatorily weight-based, and are not in concert with an inclusive, positive, and weight-neutral Health At Every Size approach to promoting wellness.

Many months ago the Association for Size Diversity and Health offered to provide experts to participate in this project of HBO, the NIH, CDC, and IOM when we became aware of

it being in development. Although the aforementioned organizations chose not to consider the evidence-based HAES approach then, ASDAH is now fully committed to doing everything within our power to identify the fear-mongering and harmful concepts that the Weight of the Nation documentary puts forward as ‘truth’.

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