HEALTH

Community, schools must address childhood obesity, health specialist says

Outreach efforts needed to battle weight problems, says Dr. Bill Dietz.

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A nationally renowned health specialist who spoke at the University of Texas on Thursday emphasized a holistic approach to controlling childhood obesity, including community outreach efforts and nutrition education in schools and homes.

"We must complement medical changes with changes in sociocultural and socioeconomic norms," said Dr. Bill Dietz, director of obesity prevention for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Dietz spoke at the second annual Michael and Susan Dell Lectureship in Child Health about the importance of policy-level changes to challenge obesity. He highlighted community-based interventions, exemplified by the Paso del Norte Health Foundation, which encourages physical activity and balanced nutrition plans for the residents of El Paso while providing grants for school-based initiatives that educate young students and staff about health.

He also discussed the success Arkansas schools have had in fighting obesity by requiring 30 minutes of daily physical activity for children and education for cafeteria workers, among other policies.

The message about the dangers of obesity must be used to create a social movement, he said.

"The parent on the street doesn't understand what obesity means," said Dietz. "We need grass-roots engagement, and it is important to link the school and the community."

Developing healthy habits

According to Dr. Bill Dietz, parents can help prevent childhood obesity by following these steps:

Reduce children's intake of foods high in calories and low in nutrients, such as fast foods.

• Increase their intake of fruits and vegetables.

• Decrease their intake of sugar.

• Reduce their TV time.

• Increase breast-feeding in early childhood.
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- Increase children's physical activity.

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