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Two University of Birmingham scholars have launched a project aimed at bridging the gap between academic biblical studies and faith communities.

Posted on Friday 14th March 2008

Urgent action is needed to tackle a growing tide of obesity in the West Midlands according to a group of leading obesity experts from the University of Birmingham. The academics including believe that more must be done in areas like transport policy, town planning, education and access to sport to encourage a healthy lifestyle and tackle obesity.

Dr Neil Thomas who leads a number of projects focusing tackling obesity in the community comments: With nearly a quarter of adults in our region already classed as obese this is a problem that simply can not be ignored as it has massive implications for the health service. To really tackle obesity we need to look at every aspect of the problem. From develop new treatments for people who are already obese, to finding the best ways to change people's attitude to exercise, diet and lifestyle.

The approach we have taken is developing research that looks to tackle obesity across our lifespan.

So current projects include everything from examining the effects that natural steroids have on our risks of developing diabetes, to developing ways to tackle obesity and lifestyle problems in the community. This can involve anything from a programme of "cook and taste" classes in schools teaching parents about the importance of healthy eating to planned activity sessions for children.

There are lots of excellent ideas about how to tackle obesity but if we are to achieve real benefits this must become a priority for society and this means providing resources in everything from transport to education to try and get people to develop a healthy lifestyle."

Two of the biggest areas of concern in the West Midlands are the rapidly increasing rates of childhood obesity and the increase in cases of Type 2 diabetes, particularly amongst the region's South Asian Populations.

Professor Tim Barrett is a specialist in childhood obesity and diabetes: "Childhood obesity cases have doubled in the UK since the start of the millennium and we already know that obese children are more likely to become obese adults. In Birmingham 1 in 5 eleven years olds is now classified as obese. As someone who sees increasing numbers of obese children there is a genuine concern that our current generation of children will die from obesity related disease before their parents.

Our whole society needs to take action to tackle childhood obesity before we see a generation of people develop obesity related diseases."

Rates of Type 2 Diabetes in South-Asian communities across the West Midlands are also rising rapidly. Research done in Birmingham has shown that South – Asians have a four- to six-fold increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes compared with the white British population.

Dr Shahrad Taheri, who runs the region's largest obesity clinic, explains: "We are seeing particularly worrying increases in rates of Type 2 diabetes amongst South Asians. Even a relatively small change in body weight and shape can have a dramatic effect on their risk of developing Type 2 diabetes compared to the white British population. Unfortunately many South Asians are not aware that they are at increased risk.

Studying obesity and diabetes in an ethnically diverse region like the West Midlands has forced us to change our views about what a health body shape and BMI really is."

Professor Asker Jeukendrup, who specialises in exercise metabolism and nutrition, adds "Physical inactivity is an underlying cause of the obesity problem. For people who are overweight or obese it is more important to focus on fitness than on fatness! We have to find out what type of exercise we need to do and how much to gain significant health effects. This does not necessarily involve going to the gym but simply being more active in daily life"

The group of academics are: Professor Tim Barrett, Professor Asker Jeukendrup, Professor Joan Duda, Dr Neil Thomas, Dr Jeremy Tomlinson and Dr Shahrad Taheri

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NOTES TO EDITORS

Obesity Statistics [1]

In England, the proportion of men classed as obese increased from 13.2 per cent in 1993 to 23.1 per cent in 2005 and from 16.4 per cent to 24.8 per cent for women during the same period. There was no significant change in the proportion of adults who were overweight;

In 2004, among ethnic minority groups, Black Caribbean and Irish men had the highest prevalence of obesity (25 per cent each). For women, obesity prevalence was higher for Black African (38 per cent), Black Caribbean (32 per cent) and Pakistani ethnic groups (28 per cent) and lower for Chinese women (8 per cent), than for women in the general population;

Obese women are almost 13 times more likely to develop Type 2 Diabetes than non- obese women, whilst obese men are nearly 5 times more likely to develop the illness;

The cost of obesity

In 2005, almost 871,000 prescriptions items were dispensed for the treatment of obesity compared with just over 127,000 prescriptions in 1999 (an increase of 585 per cent);

among girls. For those aged 2 to 10, the increase over the same period was from 9.6 per cent to 16.6 per cent for boys and 10.3 per cent to 16.7 per cent for girls.

In 2002, the direct cost of treating obesity was estimated at between 45.8 and 49.0 million and between 945 million and 1,075 million for treating the consequences of obesity;

In England in 2005/06 there were 2,749 Finished Consultant Episodes (FCEs) with a primary diagnosis of obesity, compared to 787 FCEs in 1996/97. Where there was a secondary diagnosis of obesity, in 2005/06 there were 62,708 FCEs compared with 21,257 in 1996/97;

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[1] Taken from NHS Statistics on Obesity, Physical Activity and Diet: England, 2006

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