Editorial

A Sweet Solution?
And a Major Philatelic Error

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This issue of Pediatric Annals is devoted to a topic of relevance to all who provide care for children in America today: the public health epidemic of overweight and obesity among our youth. The numbers are very compelling, with as many as 18% or more of children and adolescents at or above the 95th percentile in weight, a 7% or higher prevalence of impaired fasting glucose levels, and increasing type 2 diabetes among 12- to 19-year-olds. Other important complications of obesity, such as hyperlipidemia, hypertension, metabolic syndrome, hepatic steatosis, obstructive sleep apnea, asthma, orthopedic complications such as slipped capital femoral epiphysis and Blount’s disease, and pseudotumor cerebri, are likewise rising in prevalence among our patient population, especially minority youth.

It seems highly appropriate that First Lady Michelle Obama has recently made this epidemic, with its serious health implications for youth, particularly among minority youth, her focus. In currently politically gridlocked Washington, D.C., her efforts just might make some headway. Mrs. Obama’s efforts are certainly on target and highly laudable.

Mounting evidence supports the growing consumption of sugar-sweetened soft drinks as playing a role in the pediatric overweight/obesity epidemic. In the United States, the per-capita consumption of soda is approximately 50 gallons per year. Sugared beverages represent up to 10% of the average child and teen’s caloric intake (7% of caloric intake for all Americans). There are some intriguing newer ideas of how to combat this, including taxes, warning labels, and a massive public health marketing campaign, not unlike the successful anti-smoking campaigns.

The U.S. Congress Joint Committee on Taxation calculated that a 3-cent tax per 12-oz. sugared soda might raise $51.6 billion over a 10-year period in the United States. In N.Y. State alone, it was estimated that a 1-cent tax per 1 oz. of soda would raise $1.2 billion. It has been calculated that the latter tax could reduce annual per capita consumption to 38.5 gallons, a reduction of more than 11 gallons.

Dr. Tom Frieden, former New York City Health Commissioner and current director of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
(CDC), has emphasized the parallels between soda and tobacco, with both industries “the sowing of doubt where there’s no reasonable doubt, funding of front groups, use of so-called experts, claims that new products which are safer for consumers are available, and the claim that they are not marketing to children” (NY Times. Feb. 12, 2010). Increased cigarette taxes certainly have had a substantial effect upon smoking rates, and the suggestion that a similar strategy for sugared beverages might also be successful is intriguing, indeed.

The souvenir sheet that illustrates this column is very impressive (see page 115), but if you look carefully, you can see that it is seriously flawed. This sheet was issued in 2009 by the extremely poor west African country of The Republic of Guinea-Bissau (formerly Portuguese Guinea) to honor the very first Nobel Prize winners, who received the 1901 awards.

Alfred Nobel’s will established that 94% of his worth was to be awarded as prizes in five categories: Chemistry, Physics, Physiology or Medicine, Literature, and Peace. On December 10, 1901, on the fifth anniversary of Nobel’s death, six men received the first awards, with two sharing the peace award.

You would be seriously mistaken if you relied on the group of gentlemen named on this sheet because close inspection indicates that even though all are pictured correctly, all three portrayed on the top row who received the Physics, the Physiology or Medicine, and the Peace prizes are shown with the same name (Wilhelm Röntgen). The correct recipients were Röntgen (Physics) for discovering X-rays, Emil von Behring (Physiology or Medicine) for developing diphtheria antitoxin, Jean H. Dunant and Frédéric Passy (Peace) for founding the Red Cross and the first French Peace society, respectively, Jacobus van’t Hoff (Chemistry) for work on reaction rates, chemical equilibrium, and osmotic pressure, and Sully Prudhomme (Literature) for his poetry (which is little read today, even in his native France).

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