

The Barocene Era

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Abstract

This communication defines and describes the Barocene era, as that phase of human development which is characterized by a major impact of overweight and obesity. We use this term to highlight the fact that overweight and obesity need to be prevented and managed on an urgent footing. If not checked, these endocrine diseases will retard our growth and reduce our well being.

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The Anthropocene Era

Geologists speak of the Anthropocene era, as a part of the Holocene era, that Earth is currently passing through. Though initially debated and derided, the term Anthropocene is now used to describe a proposed geological epoch characterized by significant human impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems.¹ The start of this era is thought to be in the mid-20th century, when socioeconomic and industrial activity accelerated after the conclusion of World War II.

The Era Of Health

A similar change is visible in the nutritional and health status of humankind. Thanks to advances in public health, preventive medicine and clinical care, nutritional parameters and life expectancy have improved drastically over the past few decades. The life expectancy of an average human being is now 73.4 years,² and is expected to increase over the coming decades.

The Era Of Challenges

There is another side to this trend, however. Along with improved nutrition, overnutrition has become a public

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health challenge as well. Overweight and obesity have become more prevalent than undernutrition in most countries of the world.³ In 2016, 39% of adults aged 18 years and over were overweight, and 13% had obesity. In numbers, this translates to more than 1.9 billion overweight adults, including over 650 million who were obese.

This has led to a corresponding increase in the number of overweight and obese persons presenting to the health care system. In fact, the need for medical care is greater in persons with obesity. The trends that we experience, and anticipate, may be described as the Barocene era of medical care.

The Era Of Action

While earlier health care systems were geared towards prevention and management of acute, infectious disease, the current ecosystem requires mitigation of obesity, its related complications and comorbidities. This requires significant change in policy making, planning and provision of health care.

The situation is expected to worsen in coming years. Obesity has become an epidemic in children and adolescents as well. Over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 were overweight or obese in 2016. Another 39 million children under the age of 5 were overweight or obese in 2020.³ All these will require extra medical attention and care as they enter adulthood.

Health care institutions, including clinics and hospitals, should be made obesity-friendly.⁴ They should be staffed by persons who are sensitive to the needs of the persons with obesity, and use obesity-friendly language. A multiprofessional, multidisciplinary approach is required to meet the needs of the burgeoning population living with overweight and obesity.

The Era of Economics

The impact of obesity on the national economy, and on health care expenditure, is immense. Its economic costs are comparable to 1.8% of gross domestic product (GDP) on average, ranging from 0.8% of GDP in India to 2.4% in Saudi Arabia. By 2060, the economic impacts from obesity are projected to grow to 3.6% of GDP on an average.⁵

Summary

Proactive measures have to be taken in order to prevent this from worsening. We have entered the Barocene era of medical care, and we must navigate our way through it, in the most effective and efficient way possible.

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