Dr. Joseph A. Skelton: Corner stores could lead to better health

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Dr. Joseph A. Skelton/Guest columnist

Recently, a statewide poll found that North Carolinians view unhealthy eating and child-hood obesity as the two most serious problems facing children in the United States, ranking above physical activity, quality of education and lack of time outdoors. Unfortunately, this is not a simple problem to fix.

Obesity is a complex disorder and a major risk factor linked to cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes and even early death. Research shows that individuals with obesity have an incredible 104 percent increase in the risk of developing heart failure compared to individuals with a normal weight. With upward of $160 billion being spent yearly dealing with the complications of obesity, this is definitely a problem we want to prevent rather than treat.

Of greatest concern, one-third of our children are overweight or obese. Research has shown that a child who is obese has arteries that resemble those of a middle-aged adult. Further, they have a 16-fold increased risk of being obese as adults, and with certainty will develop heart disease and diabetes, which could lead to early death. Researchers estimate that the present generation of children will lose upward of 1.5 million life-years.

The writer H.L. Mencken once said “for every complex problem, there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong.” If this problem were as simple as diet and exercise, then the numbers I just quoted would be ancient history.

In our program, Brenner FIT (Families In Training), over 3,000 children, teens, parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents have come to us wanting to live healthier lives. I have learned more from these families than they have ever learned from me. Most importantly, families want to be healthy, but the world doesn’t make it easy. In the present day, it is easier to be unhealthy than it is to be healthy. For many who are trying to live healthy lives in an unhealthy world, it can be a struggle.

One of the drivers of this epidemic of obesity among our children is lack of access to healthy, nutritious food. For many Americans struggling to make ends meet, affordable and healthy foods are out of their reach. Access is a problem for those living in low-income urban areas where supermarkets have closed, or rural areas too far away from larger stores that offer affordable fruits and vegetables. These areas are called “food deserts,” where buying fresh produce at a grocery store may mean four bus rides and a three-hour round trip. At the same time, these areas are often rich in fast-food outlets and convenience stores with less healthy choices.

People living in such communities often shop for food at corner stores, which commonly sell highly processed foods that are high in fat and low in nutrients. In fact, youth who live near convenience stores are heavier and consume more sugary drinks than their peers who live closer to full-service grocery stores.
Additionally, one study published in Pediatrics, a highly-respected medical journal, showed that more than 40 percent of elementary school students shopped at a corner store twice daily, often purchasing chips, candy and soda.

Much like obesity, improving access to healthy food is also a complex issue. But there are things we can do. Because youth who live in food deserts often shop in corner stores, we can encourage these retail outlets to offer healthier foods. The Healthy Corner Store Initiative would do just that by providing these stores with technical assistance and expertise in stocking and selling fresh fruits and vegetables. The Healthy Corner Store Initiative has the potential to lower the percentage of youth that are overweight, obese, or suffering from chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

Fortunately, according to the same recent poll, North Carolinians realize that it is time to take action. Seventy percent of registered voters support the creation of a Healthy Corner Store Initiative as a way of tackling the state’s childhood obesity epidemic. Additionally, a similar majority says that state and local governments should provide training and incentives to encourage neighborhood stores to stock healthy foods.

The Healthy Corner Store Initiative won’t solve all our problems, but it is a big step in the right direction to stem the tide of obesity among our children. This spring, our policy makers in Raleigh will be asked to support the Healthy Corner Store Initiative. For the health of our children, I hope they will approve this important measure.

Dr. Joseph A. Skelton is an associate professor of pediatrics at Wake Forest School of Medicine. The Journal welcomes original submissions for guest columns on local, regional and statewide topics. Essay length should not exceed 750 words. The writer should have some authority for writing about his or her subject. Our email address is: Let-ers@wsjournal.com. Essays may also be mailed to: The Readers' Forum, P.O. Box 3159, Winston-Salem, NC 27102. Please include your name and address and a daytime telephone number.