

# AMA Misfire: All That's Wrong with Medicalizing "Obesity"

(and yet, a bit of good news in controversy)

By Linda Bacon, PhD

Setting aside science and launching a new attack on bodies, the American Medical Association this summer officially deemed "obesity" a disease. This decision defies logic and common sense. The definition of obesity comes from the body mass index (BMI), which is simply a mathematical equation based on height and weight. It measures physical appearance, not health.

In other words, the AMA now tells doctors to diagnose based on how a person looks. Will it next label "blackness" a disease, based on correlations between ethnicity and cardiovascular disease?

Let's all say it together (again): *Extensive research shows that some people in the "obese" category live long, healthy, disease-free lives, proving that "obesity" itself is not disease.* Setting up the decoy of "obesity" risks missing the target. If disease is the concern, doctors, then focus on disease and its true symptoms, not a poor proxy like BMI.

The AMA decision also leads to more prejudice and discrimination, which unfortunately, also increases disease. Extensive evidence shows the chronic stress of stigma plays a role in almost every disease currently blamed on obesity. The medicalization of size has long served to drive prejudice, and this decision will compound already significant weight bias in the medical profession.

And the justification that the new definition broadens access to treatment? Translate that as more money spent on treatment, including treatments that may do more harm than good, like weight-loss programs and high-risk bariatric surgeries. In a cost-benefit analysis, too much of the benefit here goes to the anti-obesity industrial complex.

There is, however, some good news to be found in all this. If the change had been announced a few years ago, there would have been few dissenting voices in the media. But as soon as the AMA announced the redefinition, I was swamped with media requests looking for a counter opinion. The attention came, unfortunately, when I was preoccupied (delivering a HAES facilitators' training), too busy even to make many referrals to fellow HAES folks in time to meet tight media deadlines.

Still, my voice and others' promoting a HAES perspective did make their way into prominent reports like these, which (be forewarned), still show a decidedly anti-HAES bent, overall:

- National Public Radio, **Calling Obesity A Disease May Make It Easier To Get Help**, by Patti Neighmond.
- The 2X2 Project, **The Appearance Of A Disease: Debating the AMA's vote on obesity**, by Kathleen Bachynski.
- *SF Chronicle*, **Debate grows over whether obesity is a disease**, by Kristen V. Brown.

*Orlando Sentinel*, **In labeling obesity a disease, AMA creates controversy**, by Marni Jamison.