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## The “Other” Energy Crisis

It has been called “the other energy crisis”, and it is one of the big concerns of everyone from governments to companies and individuals. Obesity and overweight is not just an issue for our waistlines after Christmas, but how to deal with it will, along with the environment, be one of the big new and serious challenges for the society of the future. Going by shocking current trends, the UK government estimates that by 2050, 60% of men, 25% of children and 50% of women will be obese. Also given that the World Cancer Research Fund says obesity is a major factor in cancer, means that there is an increasing urgency to find new ways to tackle this growing problem.

In England there are already several innovative new ideas appearing as to how to deal with the growing calorie crisis – all the way from government level, through company policy down to small restaurants. On the grand scale, the government is planning so-called “fit towns”. Following a similar successful scheme in France, these healthy towns are planned as part of 10 new eco-towns. The key to the development will be to build the urban environment in such a way that people do more physical activity as a normal part of everyday life. On a practical level this means such things are more cycle lanes, safe walking routes for children and people to and from school and the suburbs, and larger more modern playgrounds and leisure centres. Other measures will include regular weigh-ins for children to determine their BMI, healthy eating programmes in schools, and teaching children to cook healthy food.

Companies meanwhile have their own ideas about how to deal with obesity, and there is talk of a new taskforce of “Fat controllers” that will move in to monitor the health and habits of workforces. British Telecom employ around 100,000 people and recently estimated that at least 4,000 of them are at risk of health problems due to unhealthy lifestyles. The company therefore decided to introduce so-called health monitors and nutritionists to help them adopt healthy eating and exercise. While jokes have been made about employees having to hide chocolate and other high calorie snacks from “fat controllers” in their desks, companies are increasingly concerned that obesity is leading to escalating levels of sick leave and long-term health problems.

The idea has created a lot of debate as to whether this kind of intervention is acceptable, or whether it is encroaching on the private lives of the employees. On the other hand, many are concerned as to the economic impact of ill-health on firms. In the USA many employers have introduced cholesterol tests for staff, but these measures have been relatively slow to catch on in Europe, for fear of a kind of “Big Brother” syndrome.

Meanwhile a restaurant in London has its own original response to people’s unhealthy attitude to eating – they have introduced a fine on people if they take too much food and do not finish it. Guests at the Nigerian restaurant Obalende Suya Express pay a set amount of 13.95 pounds to help themselves to the large buffet, but must pay a fine of 2.50 pounds if they leave food on their plate at the end of the evening. The owner says “we realised a lot of people were wasting their food rather than finishing it.” This way people think twice about how hungry they really are, and there is less waste. The owner also wanted people to think about the starving children in Africa, and as another reminder, the fines go to the charity Oxfam. The warnings in the restaurant about the fine have not put off the customers, in fact as the owner says, it has improved people’s attitudes; “customers don’t waste food any more, they appreciate it.”