

Testimony of  
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October 16, 2003

Congressional Statement/Testimony

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SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY SUBCOMMITTEE ON ADMINISTRATIVE  
OVERSIGHT AND THE COURTS

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Good afternoon, Chairman Sessions and Honorable members of the Subcommittee on Administrative Oversight and the Courts. I am Dr. Gerard J. Musante and I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today. I have been called here to share my expertise and educated opinion on the importance of personal responsibility in food consumption in the United States. This lesson is one I have been learning about and teaching for more than 30 years to those who battle moderate to morbid obesity - a lesson that emphasizes the criticality of taking responsibility for one's own food choices. I am testifying before you today because I am concerned about the direction in which today's obesity discourse is headed. We cannot continue to blame any one industry or any one restaurant for the nation's obesity epidemic. Instead, we must work together as a nation to address this complex issue, and the first step is to put the responsibility back into the hands of individuals.

As a clinical psychologist with training at Duke University Medical Center and The University of Tennessee, I have worked for more than 30 years with thousands of obese patients. I have dedicated my career to helping Americans fight obesity. My personal road, which included the loss and maintenance of 50 of my own pounds, began when I undertook the study of obesity as a faculty member in the Department of Psychiatry at Duke University Medical Center. There, I began developing an evidenced-based, cognitive-behavioral approach to weight loss and lifestyle change. I continue to serve Duke University Medical Center as a Consulting Professor in the Department of Psychiatry. Since the early 1970's, I have published research studies on obesity and have made presentations at conferences regarding obesity and the psychological aspects of weight management.

Today, I continue my work at Structure House - a residential weight loss facility in Durham, North Carolina - where participants come from around the country and the world to learn about managing their relationship with food. Participants lose significant amounts of weight while both improving various medical parameters and learning how to control and take responsibility for their own food choices. Our significant experience at Structure House has provided us with a unique understanding of the national obesity epidemic.

Some of the lessons I teach my patients are examples of how we can encourage Americans to take personal responsibility for health and weight maintenance. As I tell my participants, managing a healthy lifestyle and a healthy weight certainly are not easy to do. Controlling an obesity or weight problem takes steadfast dedication, training and self-awareness. Therefore, I

give my patients the tools they need to eventually make healthy food choices as we best know it. Nutrition classes, psychological understanding of their relationship with food, physical fitness training and education are tools that Structure House participants learn, enabling them to make sensible food choices.

As you know, the obesity rates in this country are alarming. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have recognized obesity and general lack of physical fitness as the nation's fastest-growing health threat. Approximately 127 million adults in the United States are overweight, 60 million are obese and 9 million are severely obese. The country's childhood obesity rates are on a similar course to its adult rates, as well as increases in type II diabetes. Fortunately Americans are finally recognizing the problem. Unfortunately, many are taking the wrong approaches to combating this issue.

Lawsuits are pointing fingers at the food industry in an attempt to curb the nation's obesity epidemic. These lawsuits do nothing but enable consumers to feel powerless in a battle for maintaining one's own personal health. The truth is, we as consumers have control over the food choices we make, and we must issue our better judgment when making these decisions. Negative lifestyle choices cause obesity, not a trip to a fast food restaurant or a cookie high in trans fat. Certainly we live in a litigious society. Our understanding of psychological issues tells us that when people feel frustrated and powerless, they lash out and seek reasons for their perceived failure. They feel the victim and look for the deep pockets to pay. Unfortunately, this has become part of our culture, but the issue is far too comprehensive to lay blame on any single food marketer or manufacturer. These industries should not be demonized for providing goods and services demanded by our society.

Rather than assigning blame, we need to work together toward dealing effectively with obesity on a national level. Furthermore, if we were to start with one industry, where would we stop? For example, a recent article in the Harvard Law Review suggests that there is a link between obesity and "preference manipulation," which means advertising. Should we consider suing the field of advertising next? Should we do away with all advertising and all food commercials at half time? We need to understand that this is a multi-faceted problem and there are many influences that play a part.

While our parents, our environment, social and psychological factors all impact our food choices, can we blame them for our own poor decisions as it relates to our personal health and weight? For example, a recent study presented at the American Psychological Association conference showed that when parents change how the whole family eats and offer children wholesome rewards for not being couch potatoes, obese children shed pounds quickly. Should we bring lawsuits against parents that don't provide this proper direction? Similarly, Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston recently reported in "Pediatrics" that children who diet may actually gain weight in the long run, perhaps because of metabolic changes, but also likely because they resort to binge eating as a result of the dieting. Do we sue the parent for permitting their children to diet?

From an environmental standpoint, there are still more outside influences that could be erroneously blamed for the nation's obesity epidemic. The Center for Disease Control has found that there is a direct correlation between television watching and obesity among children. The more TV watched, the more likely the children would be overweight. Should we sue the television industry, the networks, cable, the television manufactures or the parents that permit this? And now we have internet surfing and computer games. Where does it stop?

School systems are eliminating required physical education- are we to also sue the school

systems that do not require these courses?

Throw social influences into the mix and we have a whole new set of causes for obesity. -

Another recent study in "Appetite" indicated that social norms can affect quantitative ratings of internal states such as hunger. This means that other people's hunger levels around us can affect our own eating habits. Are we to blame the individuals who are eating in our presence for our own weight problems?

As evidenced in these studies, we cannot blame any one influencing factor for the obesity epidemic that plagues our nation. Through working with obese patients, I have learned that the worst thing one can do is to blame an outside force to get themselves "off the hook," to say it's not their fault, and that they are a victim. To do this can bring about feelings of helplessness and then resignation. Directing blame or causality outside of oneself allows the individual not to accept responsibility and perhaps even to feel helpless and hopeless. "The dog ate my homework" and "the devil made me do it" allows the individual not to take serious steps toward correction because they believe these steps are not within their power. We must take personal responsibility for our choices.

What does it mean to take personal responsibility for food consumption? It means making food choices that are not detrimental to your health, and not blaming others for the choices we make. Ultimately, Americans generally become obese by taking in more calories than they expend. But certainly there are an increasing number of reasons why Americans are doing so producing rising obesity rates. Some individuals lack self-awareness and overindulge in food ever more so because of psychological reasons. Others do not devote enough time to physical activity, which becomes increasingly difficult to do in our society. Others lack education or awareness as it relates to nutrition and/or physical activity particularly in view of lessened exposure to this information. And still others may have a more efficient metabolism or hormonal deficiencies. In short, honorable members of the Subcommittee, there is yet much to learn about this problem. Congress has rightly recognized the danger of allowing Americans to continue blaming others for the obesity epidemic. It is imperative that we prevent lawsuits from being filed against any industry for answering consumer demands. The fact that we are addressing the issue here today is a step in the right direction. No industry is to blame and should not be charged with solving America's obesity problem.

Rather than pointing fingers, we should be working together on a national level to address the importance of personal responsibility in food consumption. The people who come to Structure House have a unique opportunity to learn these lessons, but they are only a select few. These lessons need to be encouraged on a national level, from an early age - in schools, homes and through national legislation that prevents passing this responsibility onto the food or other related industries.

In closing, I'd like to highlight the fact that personal responsibility is one of the key components that I teach my patients in their battle against obesity. This approach has allowed me to empower more than 10,000 Americans to embrace improved health. I urge you to consider how this type of approach could affect the obesity epidemic on a national level. By encouraging Americans to take personal responsibility for their health by limiting frivolous lawsuits against the food industry, we can put the power back into the hands of the consumers. This is a critical first step on the road toward addressing our nation's complex obesity epidemic.

For years, I have seen presidents call for "economic summits." I urge that we consider an "obesity summit." Let me suggest instead of demonizing industries that we bring everyone to the table - representatives in the health care industry, advertising, restaurants, Hollywood, school

systems, parent groups, the soft drink industry, and the bottling industry. Instead of squandering resources in defending needless lawsuits by pointing fingers, let's make everyone part of the solution. Let us encourage a national obesity summit where all the players are asked to come to the table and pledge their considerable resources toward creating a national mind set toward solving this problem. That would be in the interest of the American people.

I feel privileged to be a part of the Subcommittee's efforts. I want to thank you for allowing me to testify here before you today and I will now be glad to answer any questions.

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