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Mexico, Factor 10: Obesity

Mexico: Battling Obesity

Imagine growing up in Mexico not knowing where your next meal will come from. Starvation is a very real fear! Time progresses; conditions improve. Thirty years later you don't have that fear for your children; in fact it is quite the opposite. Your ten-year-old son weighs one hundred and twenty pounds-- fifty pounds above average recommended for his age. Not only is he battling obesity, but he is also struggling with Type 2 diabetes. He will have to overcome this obstacle, but he is not alone; 34.4% of the Mexican population shares this struggle. Their world is always changing, but this change has gone from helpful to harmful in just a few years. Changes in family life, eating habits, and lifestyles have affected the people in a detrimental way. The Mexican people are in dire need of a lifestyle correction.

1) Mexican people

In Mexico, family is a very important part of culture and religion. A majority of the people practice Roman Catholicism, and as a result of religious celebrations and beliefs, the family and neighbors create strong cultural ties. The Mexican culture is very traditional. Each person in the family has a specific function. Meet the Gomez family. Juan, the father, takes care of family decisions. Anna, the mother, is the heart of the home. She cooks, cleans, and cares for the children on a full-time basis. Alex, the son, mirrors his father's roles, while Maria, the daughter, works with her mother to complete daily tasks. As everything around them is changing, so are the family dynamics. The northern cities are evolving more quickly. (Damewood. Web). The traditional family life is being quickly replaced by a modern lifestyle.

Diet in Mexico has changed for the worse. Twenty years ago, corn, beans, and local fruits and vegetables were the staple for meals (Central American and Mexican Diet. Web). But now, industrial packaged fried foods, supersized juices, and colas are the new go-to foods for all ages of people (Bodzin, Steven, and Sara Miller Llana. Web). "There is an increased push for global food companies," said Barry Popkin, a nutrition expert at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At any time of day, children and adults have access to cheap food. Mexicans also consume large quantities of Coca-Cola. In fact, Mexico is the largest consumer of soda on the planet (Boseley. Web).

The educational system in Mexico is relatively equal for all regardless of social class. In Mexico, 36% of adults aged 25-64 have earned the equivalent of a high-school degree. This is much lower than the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) average of 75%. The younger aged group (25-34 year-olds) report that 43% have earned the equivalent of a high-school degree. This is a promising hope for Mexico's future, but it is still below the OECD average. The educational system has undergone rapid growth in the last fifty years. The system has progressed from educating three million students to over 30 million. Today nearly all children between ages 5 and 14 are in school. This progress has helped encourage students to finish school. The graduation rates have increased from 33% in 2000 to 49% in 2011. Improvements have been made despite tight budgets and a rapidly growing school-aged population (OECD Better Life. Web).

Health care in Mexico is available in a variety of forms. In 2012, Mexico achieved universal health care. Public health care is available to all Mexican citizens guaranteed via Article 4 of the Constitution. Care is fully or partially subsidized by the federal government. As of December 31, 2013, there were 4,466 hospitals in Mexico. With many of the doctors receiving training in the US, the Mexican health care is found to be comparable to that in the United States (Health Care In Mexico. Web).

Salaries are considerably low compared to the many hours of work and hard labor. The average disposable income in 2002 was 35,868 pesos (comparable to \$5,837 US dollars) with a gross income of 37,752 pesos (\$6,143 US dollars) (Mexico Average Salaries & Expenditures. Web). With a limited income, families struggle to justify buying more expensive, more healthful food options versus inexpensive, low nutritional value foods. More processed foods are available at a low cost making them more appealing to the consumer.

2) Food availability

Access to ready to eat food is not limited at all, but the access to healthful food is. Because of the low salaries and high poverty rates in Mexico, people cannot afford to purchase fresh produce. Nearly 60% of the workforce earns less than \$13 a day. A new trend for meals is instant ramen noodles. People find instant ramen as a hot, filling meal for less than 40 cents a serving (Dickerson. Web). Processed foods are convenient to people at a low cost. It is appealing to the lower economic working class.

The snack and soft drink companies have too much power. American companies like Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Nestle, Danone, Unilever PLC and Kellogg have expanded their advertising and marketing tactics into Mexico. They attract customers through low food costs and intriguing commercials, but forget to mention the dangerous health concerns that their products cause if not consumed as part of a balanced diet. Mexico is the ninth-largest market for processed food in the world. Companies target children in their advertising. A study by Mexico's National Public Health Institute found that packaged food and beverages accounted for 20% of the advertisements on open-TV; and 75% of those ads were for food and beverage products deemed unhealthy (Guthrie. Web).

Many urban areas of Mexico practice agriculture. There are 22,800 hectares of land dedicated to crop production. There are between 16,000 people working on 11,500 family farms. Many products are produced in the country; maize, fruit, vegetables, and animals are produced for family consumption and local sale while there are large-scale productions of nopal, amaranth, vegetables, herbs and ornamental plants especially for city and regional markets. The Mexican government has increased its support of agriculture since 2000 (Mexico City. Web).

3) Current status

Mexico is in a public health crisis. The new sedentary lifestyles, powerful snack and soft drink industries, and a genetic heritage susceptible to diabetes are breeding grounds for dangerous health issues.

Ten years ago diabetes was an issue for "old people," but now children even as young as 12 and 13 years old are suffering from the dangerous health issue. Mexico has higher obesity rates among 5 to 11 year olds than any other country. A 2012 health survey states that 34.4 percent of children in Mexico are obese. Over 400,000 youth suffer from Type 1 diabetes (which requires insulin injections) or Type 2 (which is associated with obesity, inactivity, and family history) (Joshnson. Web).

Instant gratification is a way of life for consumers! Our world is forever in a hurry. High demands of employers and stressful deadlines don't allow time for employees to go home for dinner as like they did in the past. Crowded urban areas often force workers to make long commutes, and public security concerns can "keep them cooped up" at home. "It is practically impossible to go home to eat lunch now," said Dr. Gabriella Ortiz, a department director at the National Center of Preventative Health and Disease Control. Some people order in their food to be delivered to the office or go right outside and eat at the taco stands (Johnson. Web). They aren't eating the freshly prepared foods that they would at home. The food has high cholesterol, high sugar, and high sodium level foods. It is leading to an alarming trend toward a nation comprised of alarmingly overweight individuals.

The effects of obesity are apparent on more than just people's waistlines. It's adding to Mexico's health care costs. "When we project increase in diabetes and the costs associated with it, the Mexican health system will be overwhelmed. It can't be paid for. By the year 2020, it will be catastrophic. By 2030, it faces collapse," stated physician Dr. Abelardo Avila Curel (Johnson. Web).

The present status of obesity is at the highest all-time rate. Mexico surpassed the United States title of "highest obesity rate in the world" in 2014. According to the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization, 32.8 percent of Mexico's population is obese. The impact has been detrimental to the health of the people; 14 percent of the population has diabetes. The rate of high blood pressure is rising, also high blood pressure can lead to strokes and heart attacks; both are very serious health concerns.

4) Current trends for improvement

Mexican officials have made efforts to combat obesity in their country. They decided to add a soda tax, 10% per liter. This was less than the 20% tax that the campaigners wanted, but it is a start. According to the National Institute of Public Health, the 10% tax should reduce the annual consumption of soda to 141 liters per person from the original 163 liters per person. That could help prevent up to 630,000 cases of diabetes by 2030 (Boseley. Web).

The goal of the soda tax is to discourage the consumption of soda. Mexico's added tax is an experiment on a huge level. "Mexico will have a domino effect," said Dr. Simon Barquera of the Institute. Public health advocates, students, consumer activists, and politicians are sharing what they are doing with the public. Awareness is rising. "One of the vice-presidents of the big companies told me they had done their studies and the soda tax will not reduce consumption or solve obesity," he said. "We know that. My kids know that. But it is an educative tax. It sends a message from the government to the people that we think this is bad for you" (Boseley. Web).

They are in need of a "change of culture" as President Enrique Pena Nieto would say. Congress voted in favor of the anti-obesity measures. Mexico has confronted the food and drink industry head on. An added tax on not only soda, but also on junk food is now in place. The tax will increase the price of junk foods--those high in saturated fat, sugar and salt--by 8%. The money raised from the added tax is intended to go toward health programs. Members in Congress and anti-obesity activists also want to use it to increase access to drinking water in schools (Boseley. Web).

Campaigners against obesity worldwide have been looking to food and drink taxes as the start of change. It encourages people to adjust their diet by reducing the amount of fattening food and drink they consume. People around the world find what is happening in Mexico to be "really interesting" (Boseley. Web). This is a step in the right direction. Mexican representatives and anti-obesity campaigners are working hard to eradicate obesity.

Mexican schools are a hot spot for marketing to children. Most schools don't have cafeterias. For decades, students ran to food trucks and vendors in the schoolyard to purchase their lunch--a lunch full of high fat, high calorie substances. Today students are not eating the fruit sprinkled with lime and salt as they once did. They have traded the fruit for convenient pre-packed foods. They crave sweets. New guidelines are in place banning the sales of soft drinks or sugary fruit drinks at schools. Only water, unsweetened but flavored water, pure fruit juices, or low-fat milk will be sold in school (Stevenson. Web).

Reality has sunk in for anti-obesity programs; there are many setbacks. Most Mexican schools are under-equipped public schools. Most don't offer hot meals. Offering adequate and acceptable physical education programs presents yet another dilemma. In April 2010, Congress approved a law requiring daily exercise for school children. Prior to that time, students had only one class of physical activity a week. The largest issue with requiring a physical education class is finding a place to hold it. Three-quarters of Mexican

schools don't have a playground or gymnasium for a safe place to exercise (Stevenson. Web). By increasing the number of physical education class hours from one to three hours per week, the amount of physical activity is increased. The idea is that children are fat because they are inactive. They hope that increasing the activity levels during a scheduled time like school will decrease the high obesity rates. By increasing the number of physical education hours from one to three hours per week and decreasing the inactivity of students, it is hoped the high obesity rates will decline.

Celebrities have joined the cause. "Fight Against Obesity" is a program to encourage youngsters to eat healthful foods. Fabiloa Balbuena Torres, a professional wrestler, is one of many taking part in the program to fight against obesity (Johnson. Web). By decreasing obesity in Mexico, not only are people with slimmer waistlines emerging, but also people with an improved quality of life. By losing the extra pounds, people can also lose some of the worries associated with it. The risks of high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease decrease dramatically when one eats a balanced diet and maintains an appropriate BMI.

Mexico has a prevalent issue with water scarcity, which has an effect on obesity in the country. The lack of potable water has pushed people to consume soda instead. Quick to see a chance for profit, the soda industry has capitalized on this idea by increasing the availability of soda in those areas of Mexico without safe drinking water. When soda is less expensive than water, people are drawn to buy the less expensive item without regard to the health concerns.

5) Solutions

My suggestion is to create a program that will send dietitians and/or dietetic students to Mexico and offer a program to encourage people who are willing to make a lifestyle change. If only a small number of people are willing to take the first step toward change, the program directors must not be discouraged. The number may be small, but the impact can be great. The people who are willing to take the first step on their own to make a positive lifestyle change are those who are wise enough to recognize their need. They will have accomplished the hardest part and serve to encourage others.

The program will be offered to all Mexicans willing to make a change. Dietitians are experts in human nutrition and the regulation of diet. There are four forms of dietitians; clinical, community, management, and consultant. Mexico will utilize clinical and community dietitians most. The need is there for clinical dietitians. The prevalence of high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity has sent many citizens to the hospital. They will assess patients' nutritional needs, develop and implement nutrition programs, and evaluate and report the results. Clinical dietitians work closely with doctors to create the best plan for the patient. Community dietitians would be able to help a wide array of people. Community dietitians would provide instruction on grocery shopping and food preparation to the public. The dietitians will be able to give specific food tips and meal plans for each person.

Dietitians can offer more than advice for food. They are a great support system. The journey of making a lifestyle change is very difficult. The tight-knit communities provide a perfect scenario for implementing change. The person or persons who are on the path to create a better life for them will need support from family and neighbors.

Another part of the solution is to promote the consumption of fresh produce. Since fresh fruits and vegetables are so expensive at the markets or not readily available, community gardens will be able to offset the costs and increase availability of produce. Community gardens would be a way to be a part of the whole process. The producer, consumer, and eater are all the same person. Creating a sense of accomplishment at being able to consume the products of the individuals' toil can be a great coup. Community gardens also give ties to the family and community. The job cannot be done alone. The garden is made possible by the work of many people. While working together, they are accomplishing a

lot more than just producing fresh produce. They are creating lasting relationships, support, and a new meaning of the word *lifestyle*. Members who participate in the community gardens will be able to understand the impact that eating healthy and being active has on their bodies.

One other factor to my solution is to continue the program Fight Against Obesity. Eating healthy alone will not stop the obesity epidemic. Regular exercise and proper portion control is needed. This program that is currently in place encourages young people to eat healthy and exercise. Celebrities and athletic stars publicly support this cause. Young people look to celebrities as role models; that's why they are perfect representations for positive change.

Mexico finds itself in a situation similar to that of Canada a few decades ago. Canada and Mexico Battling Infant and Childhood Obesity (CAMBIO) is an organization with the purpose of enhancing research capacity in childhood obesity in Mexico. The project involves knowledge transfer among researchers, educational institutions, government ministries, non-governmental organizations and community-based groups. CAMBIO's long-term goal directly affects the lives of Mexicans. Their goal is to increase research capacity and knowledge transfer, and to promote partnerships (Janssen and Taylor. Web). If knowledge can be shared between groups, more people will benefit because of shared learning. As programs like CAMBIO start raising national attention, more organizations like it will form or join the battle to increase public awareness, clinical programs, and policy changes.

Communities, government, and private organizations all have a role to fulfil in order to implement the use of dietitians in the clinical and community aspect of Mexico. Each community needs to provide a dietitian to be able to serve the people. Each community will have to take its population into consideration in the process of deciding how many dietitians they need to serve the area. Community health agencies can do their part in promoting the use of dietitians. If higher-ranking officials will recommend the use of dietitians, more community members may be willing to participate. This must start small, but will have great impact. The closer the ties between the people implementing change the more beneficial it will be. The national government will need to provide funding for the cause. They have done a huge part in implementing a national health care system for all citizens already, but with my solution, they need to make dietitians available at all hospitals. By continuing to emphasize the effects of obesity, there is no reason for the public not to be aware of all the possibilities for help to battle obesity. Private organizations can promote exchanges of knowledge among the groups. Other groups that help battle obesity can utilize the new research and methods. Private organizations bring the spokespeople. When there are celebrities or people of status supporting a cause, progress happens. If they can support the fight against obesity, then more people will be willing to get on board to help fight the fight. People are willing to listen; they just need a little extra nudge sometimes.

The family can be involved by participating in the use of dietitians. If people will use resources such as community nutritionists, they will live to see the results of hard work and good eating habits. If the use of dietitians becomes popular, more systems will be implemented in the battle against obesity. The family is a crucial part in implementing change. They want what is best for their loved ones. If they have the foresight to see what will happen to them if they continue to be on the road to obesity, they will want to get back on the right path as soon as possible. The close family ties are critical in my three recommendations for change: a support system while working with dietitians, a helper in the community garden, and a motivator while exercising. The families and friends are going to make a difference in the fight against obesity.

The Mexican people need a lifestyle change. With my recommendations and the current systems in place, Mexicans will have the resources and support to win the battle against obesity. The people willing to take the first step toward change will succeed.

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