



## Background Beliefs

Student Handout #4: **Homosexuality Was Once a 'Disease' Too**

By Paul F. Campos

The history of medicine is littered with examples of imaginary diseases and arbitrarily defined pathologies. One need not refer to such once eminently respectable fields of academic research as phrenology or eugenics when more contemporary examples come so readily to mind. Consider that a generation ago the medical world's consensus view was that same-sex attraction was a serious mental illness that cried out for effective "treatment." This is merely one example of how socially marginal people are stigmatized by being defined as sick or crazy or otherwise defective.

Now "obesity" (defined by our public health authorities as a body mass index of 30 or higher) has been transformed into a disease. In fact, except at statistical extremes, the correlation between weight and health risk is weak or nonexistent. The vast majority of Americans who the government defines as weighing too much have, on average, as good or better health than the scientifically baseless "normal weight" category of BMI 18.5 to 24.9. This is confirmed by the overwhelming bulk of the epidemiological evidence. The studies that find a strong correlation between increasing weight and health risk are the true outliers - and they produce these correlations by highly dubious statistical methods, such as by excluding 90% of the deaths in their studies.

The current claims about what long-term consequences increasing average body mass has for public health are, almost word for word, the same claims American public health authorities were making in the 1950s, when the New York Times featured stories with headlines such as "Overweight: America's Number One Health Problem." And indeed by current definitions, 45% of the American populace was either overweight or obese in 1960.

It should be unnecessary to point out that all those predictions turned out to be not merely wrong but represented the precise opposite of what has since happened. Life expectancy and overall health are far better now than they were 50 years ago, while rates of heart disease, stroke, cancer and almost all the other diseases for which body fat is being blamed have plunged. (Diabetes is to some extent an exception, but even the CDC's own data fail to show that diabetes rates have risen over the last 20 years.)

As for discrimination, I admire the work you've done documenting the astonishing levels of prejudice and bigotry people (and especially white women) who aren't thin face in this culture, but one does not combat stigma effectively by continuing to advocate the search for a final solution to the continued existence of the stigmatized group.

After all, there are plenty of well-meaning, sincere people in our culture who have great compassion for those among their fellow citizens who suffer from the "disease" of same-sex attraction. And they are eager to help.

I note, too, that biological sex is a far better predictor of mortality risk than fatness, and that castration extends life expectancy in large mammals. Thus, unlike the "obesity epidemic" there is a ready solution to the "masculinity epidemic" - but perhaps some diseases aren't worth curing.

*Paul Campos is a professor of law at the University of Colorado, and a syndicated columnist for Scripps Howard News Service. His most recent book is "The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health."*

Source: "How Obese Are We," L.A. Times, September 17, 2007.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-op-dustup17sep17,0,109330.story>