

Dear Reader,

Happy New Year! And a warm welcome to our winter newsletter, which is bursting with our news from the end of last year.

2006 was an exciting time for those tackling obesity, not least because of increased government attention to the problem, culminating in the launch of **NICE guidelines** on obesity in December (p4).

Last year also saw significant developments here at Weight Concern, as we continued to advise on government **policy**, develop **resources** for health professionals and the public (p3,p6), to

pioneer our own **research** on policy-relevant issues (p4), and to **train** health professionals all over the country in childhood and adult obesity treatment.

Weight Concern's **Dr Ian Campbell** was rarely out of the press, putting across our view on the latest obesity news. Other members of the team were also able to set people straight on weight-related matters - our dietitian Alison Chipperfield gave Daily Express readers a skilful analysis of the unsuitability of the 'maple syrup' diet for long-term weight loss, following a rumoured surge in its popularity!

In total, the charity's name was mentioned in 33 UK newspaper articles in 2006, compared to just 3 in 2005 - we hope this reflects our growing contribution to the national battle against obesity. We remain committed to excellence in resource development, training and research, and look forward to more exciting times in 2007.

Best wishes,



Dr Susan Carnell (Newsletter Editor)

TIPPED FOR THE TOP: Success for the Ten Top Tips Web Diary



Mike Chapman before...

Mike Chapman is a 46 year old web manager who is no stranger to healthy, active pursuits - he is a keen photographer of sports and aircraft, and is involved with a local rugby club in his spare time.

But over the last few years Mike's weight had crept up, and in 2004 he developed a knee problem following a foot injury. Two operations later the problem was gone, but Mike was still suffering occasional pain, with a lot of strength lost.

When a full medical revealed raised cholesterol levels, Mike decided it was time to take action to improve his health, and his GP suggested that losing 20lb of body weight could make all the difference.

So Mike jumped at the chance to take part in the Ten Top Tips Web Diary - a ten week initiative giving four people the opportunity to receive web-based feedback on their weight loss attempts from Weight Concern's specialist dietitian, Alison Chipperfield.

Getting started

"I had thought about my weight and had some success with dieting before," says Mike. "But when I started the Ten Top Tips I'd been seeing slow but steady weight gain over the previous 2 to 3 years - not helped by the problem in my left knee - and I was really starting to get tired of seeing perfectly good shirts and trousers replaced by larger sized versions!"

The Ten Top Tips (TTT) were developed by Weight Concern in conjunction with Cancer Research UK's Reduce The Risk campaign. They are all based on scientific evidence and designed to fit into daily life.

"I thought it seemed like a sensible approach which I could follow without drastically changing my habits," says Mike.

The additional web feedback element also appealed: "I thought that having my successes or failures visible on the internet might encourage me to comply!"

Keeping it up

Over the ten weeks of the programme Mike and the other Ten Top Tippers - Liz, Emma and Stacey - each found certain tips harder than others.

"The hardest tip for me was focusing on what I'm eating rather than having my mind elsewhere," says Mike. "I leave the house before anyone in the family is up so the temptation to watch breakfast TV rather than sit in silence is enormous!"

Mike found another tip - eating five portions of fruit or vegetables a day - much easier: "Starting TTT in the summer meant that berries and peaches were available, cheap and great to snack on."



And...after! Taking it step by step: Mike strides to the end of the TTT challenge.

But the tip he is most proud of achieving is 'Walk off the weight'. "Monday to Friday I get 5,000 paces for 'free', as I have a twenty-five minute walk from the station to the office, and in a regular working day I probably clock up an average of another 3-4,000 going to meetings and getting lunch."

And Mike has demonstrated his commitment to the TTT by literally going the extra mile. "Any shortfall I make up in the evenings with a walk around the village."

(cont. on p2)

Tipped for the Top (cont. from p1)

Mike has also managed to keep walking at the weekend, despite anticipating that this would be a challenge: "As it's turned out there's usually something to do on the Saturday and Sunday which makes up for not walking to work.

"On one Saturday I did 8,000 paces mowing the grass runway at my son's model aeroplane club!"


Expert advice

One of the main benefits of the Web Diary in Mike's eyes was getting week-by-week feedback on his progress. "At first I was frustrated by losing only 1-2lbs a week - this seemed like a relatively small benefit given the fairly major changes I was making in terms of diet and exercise.

"So Alison's advice that this was a healthy rate and would be more likely to see long-term weight loss, was very helpful."

Mike thinks that he will miss Alison's feedback, but feels well-equipped to keep up the good work.

"As she was advising four participants over ten weeks, Alison covered a lot of ground - keeping the tips up during illness or on holiday, recovering from set-backs, sensible alcohol consumption etc - and all of that information is as relevant to me now as it was then."

Mike also thinks that some new sources of support may prove even more rigorous than Alison: "My family are also supportive, so if I am ever tempted to dip into the biscuit tin then I get immediate feedback!"

**Seeing results**

Each and every one of the Ten Top Tippers were pleased to see substantial decreases in their weight over the ten week programme - Mike alone lost a staggering one stone and two pounds.

But the benefits did not stop there. All participants reported feeling healthier, happier and more energetic, and after just a few weeks of the programme Mike noticed two changes that were particularly important to him.

"I'm feeling significantly fitter and the legs are definitely stronger," he said, only seven weeks into the programme. "And some of those shirts and trousers have been pulled out of the wardrobe and they now fit!"

**Keeping it off**

A problem with many weight loss programmes is the difficulty of keeping the weight off at the end. But Mike isn't letting this sabotage his hard-won weight loss. "I've kept going with the TTT since

the programme officially ended, and although the rate of weight loss has continued to fall, I have lost another 3-4lbs," he said when we spoke to him in December. "I won't make my target weight before Christmas - I still have another 5lb to lose - but I'll get there in the New Year."

And Mike had already thought about how he would deal with the festive season - a well-known challenge to dieters everywhere. "I actually had a rehearsal when my wife and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary - I hid the Ten Top Tips pack for 48 hours! I did over-indulge but I don't think I ate and drank as much as I would have done before the programme.

"From Christmas Eve through to Boxing Day I'll eat and drink without thinking of the consequences, but then I'll return to Ten Top Tips on the 27th."

And did our SuperDietitian approve of Mike's strategy? "Wholeheartedly!" laughed Alison, when we asked her for one last piece of feedback. "Mike has worked really hard and I'm certain that the Ten Top Tips are now part of his healthy lifestyle as ingrained habits. I have no doubt that he picked up exactly where he left off after Christmas!"

To get your own copy of the Ten Top Tips, call 0207 242 0200

Or visit www.reduce therisk.org.uk for more information.

NEWS ROUND-UP**OVER 12 MILLION UK ADULTS AND 1.5 MILLION CHILDREN WILL BE OBESE BY 2010**

A government report last year revealed shocking projected estimates of UK obesity rates.

If current trends continue, nearly 7 million men and 6 million women will be obese in 2010. Over 8 million men and 6 million women will be overweight.

Among 2-15 year old children, 800,000 boys and 900,000 girls are projected to be obese, while 600,000 boys and 600,000 girls will be overweight.

Responding to the report, Dr Ian Campbell, Weight Concern's Medical Director, said: "We need to change the environment to make it easier for people to be healthy, with measures such as cutting the aggressive marketing of unhealthy foods and making it safer for people to cycle or

NEWS ROUND-UP**OFCOM BANS JUNK FOOD ADS AIMED AT UNDER 16s**

Child-targeted TV advertising of junk food will be significantly curtailed under new rules announced by Ofcom in December last year.

The regulating body responded to criticism of its initial plans from a host of organisations - including Weight Concern - by toughening the proposed regulations.

There will now be a total ban on advertising any foods high in fat, salt and sugar during all preschool

children's programmes, all programmes on main channels aimed at children and young people (eg music shows), all cable and satellite children's channels, and all adult programmes with above-average child audience figures.

The FSA's traffic light system will be used to assess which foods are included, and Ofcom has now agreed on a phased introduction, with full implementation by December 2008.

Weight Concern is delighted that action has now been extended from under 10s to all under 16s, and that the advertising ban will be specific to unhealthy foods.

ATTENTION: BIG PANEL!!!

Thanks so much to all those who have signed up to the Big Panel, and many apologies for keeping you waiting for our first missive.

We are busy planning our first study now... so expect to hear from us any minute!!

RESEARCH ROUND-UP

OBESITY CAN DAMAGE CHILDREN'S FEET

Excess weight can damage children's feet, says new research presented in November last year.

In two studies of 9-12 year old children, researchers from the University of East London found that obese children were unstable when walking, walked at a slower pace, and had longer, wider feet than normal weight children.

These abnormalities could compromise children's ability to exercise, and suggest body weight should be a consideration when promoting physical activity.

Source: Talk at Society of Chiropractors and Podiatrists conference, Brighton, 23 November 2006

NEWS ROUND-UP

NEW IVF RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OBESE WOMEN

Women with a BMI over 36 - six points over the agreed cut-off for obesity - should still be given access to fertility treatment, say the British Fertility Society (BFS).

In wide-ranging, comprehensive guidelines designed to bring an end to the IVF 'postcode lottery', the BFS recommends that women with BMIs over 29 should be given help to lose weight.

However, if weight loss attempts are unsuccessful, those with a BMI over 36 should still be offered treatment.

Currently, practice varies across the UK, with some withholding treatment at BMIs of 30 or over.

Very overweight women respond poorly to fertility drugs and are at increased risk of complications such as diabetes, high blood pressure, blood clots, and bleeding after birth.

KNOWING YOUR OPTIONS: Weight Concern launches specialist booklet for obese individuals

Overweight and obesity are all-encompassing terms, and even within one weight category there can be huge variation in weight. Some people fall just over the cut-off point for overweight or obesity (BMIs of 25 and 30 respectively), while others may be extremely obese, with BMIs as high as 40 or 50.

This means that information resources that suit one group of individuals may not suit another. So Weight Concern has been working with the British Heart Foundation to produce a new booklet - 'Taking control of your weight' - specifically tailored for people with a BMI of 35 plus.

No ground left uncovered

The aim of the booklet is to empower adults who are very overweight to take action to reduce their weight. It therefore combines details about how individuals can access services and treatments with ways that they can start to tackle their weight on their own.

A variety of treatment options are covered, ranging from dietary, physical activity and lifestyle change approaches, to weight loss medications and surgery. Space is also given to alternative options such as commercial slimming groups and self-help methods.

Both NHS and private treatment are considered, and there are details about what treatments are available on the NHS, and how to find out if they are available locally.

The booklet also contains useful information on how obesity is measured,



A perfect match: Weight Concern and BHF's 'Taking control of your weight' is now available.

To get your own copy or order in bulk, call 0870 600 6566

Or visit www.bhf.org.uk for more information.

the gradual process by which people become obese, and how to weigh up the health risks posed by obesity.

New year's resolutions

'Taking control of your weight' was launched in January and is now available. The public can download or order it for free from the BHF website, while health professionals can order in bulk by phoning 0870 600 6566.

"As far as we know, this is the first booklet of its kind," said Weight Concern's specialist dietitian Alison Chipperfield. "We felt it was high time to create a well-informed, up-to-date resource that specifically outlined all the options for obese people wanting to control their weight - together with their pros and cons."

NEWS ROUND-UP

BUILT ENVIRONMENT CAN TACKLE OBESITY, SAYS CABE

Cities should be designed to boost the community's flagging activity levels, said the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) in a report released in October last year.

The document, 'Physical Activity and the built environment' outlines CABE's ideas on how the quality of

parks should be improved to encourage their use for formal and informal exercise, and walking and cycling routes.

Meanwhile offices should contain showers and secure parking for bikes, to support healthy lifestyles.

The report also highlights the need for greater cooperation between government departments and between local authorities and PCTs in order to deliver better health through buildings and spaces.

Weight Concern agrees that environmental action is essential to tackle the obesity epidemic, and fully supports CABE's call to action.

NICE BREAKS NEW GROUND: Obesity guidelines now available

Following a thorough, painstaking consultation process, NICE issued long-awaited guidelines for tackling obesity in December 2006.

The guidelines are a first for NICE, in that they make recommendations for both prevention and treatment, and are designed to help not just health professionals, but also other groups - including the British public themselves.

Treatment

NICE recommends that adults who are overweight or obese should first be helped to make healthy, long-lasting changes to their diet and exercise habits.

Only where attempts to lose weight are unsuccessful should weight loss medication or surgery be considered. Those with a BMI over 50 may be offered surgery as a first line treatment. Those with a BMI over 40, or between 35 and 40 with weight-related disorder, may be considered for surgery as a last resort.

Surgery should only be considered for children if they have a BMI over 40, all

other weight loss attempts have failed, and they are post-pubertal.

Prevention

The guidelines call for support from a range of bodies.

Local authorities are asked to design transport, public spaces and

buildings to encourage physical activity.

Schools and employers should make healthy changes to their food provision, as well as promoting active travel to school or work, and recreational activity.

There is also weight loss advice for the public. Adults should aim for gradual, sustained weight loss of no more than 1kg a week, and should reduce intake to under 1,000kcal a day for no more than 12 weeks.

Thirty minutes of moderate-intensity exercise five times a week is recommended for adults, while children should do at least 60 minutes a day.

Our contribution

Amongst the range of experts on the NICE guideline group was Weight Concern's Helen Croker, and Professor Jane Wardle was consulted as an expert in the area.

"Over the last year and a half I must have attended over 15 meetings and

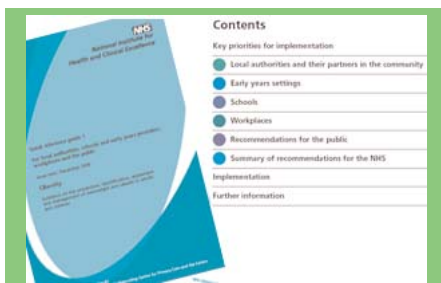
ploughed my way through several days worth of emails and documents," reflects Helen. "But it was all worth it to produce such a useful document.

Everyone at Weight Concern was especially pleased to see that the guidelines acknowledge two key features of obesity: 1) reducing intake and increasing physical activity are far from simple, and 2) tackling the problem requires action from a variety of angles.

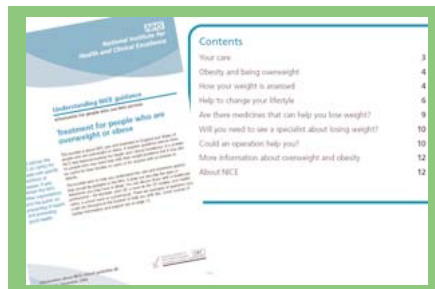
We hope the guidelines will be a catalyst for action in all sectors of society.

For a full copy of the guidelines, with summaries for health professionals, patients, carers and the public, visit:

www.nice.org.uk



Empowering individuals: Advice is provided for patients as well as health professionals



Society-wide prevention: NICE acknowledges the role of organisations other than the NHS

DOES TELLING PARENTS HELP?: Latest news from Weight Concern's Weight Feedback Project

Last year the government announced plans to measure the height and weight of all school children in reception (4-5 years) and Year 6 (10-11 years).

Currently this is just a monitoring exercise and there are no plans to feed the information back to parents. However, there has been much debate over whether feedback should be given to parents: Would it be helpful? Or just cause unnecessary or harmful concern?

Finding the facts

To answer this important question, Weight Concern launched the Weight Feedback Study in June last year, with new recruit Chloe Grimmett at the helm. "I was really pleased to come in on this project right from the beginning," says Chloe. "At the moment no-one knows the best way to give feedback, if at all. By doing our project now we will be in a great position to advise individual schools, LEAs, or even the government if giving feedback should become policy."

In September 2006 interviews were carried out with headteachers, school

Sensitivity and sensibility: Weight Concern researchers investigate the impact of weighing children in school

nurses and parents to explore their opinions on how to weigh and measure children sensitively and communicate information to parents. Practicalities of data collection were another prime focus.

Inter-disciplinary expertise

The project is also benefiting from advice from its multi-disciplinary steering group, which includes Dr Penny Gibson, (Consultant Paediatrician), Professor Tim Cole (Professor of Medical Statistics) and Olena Baker (Education Project Manager at BHF - funders of the study).

"We are thrilled to have had such useful input from the steering group and everyone else who has helped with the study," says Helen Croker, co-supervisor of the project. "We would especially like to thank all the school nurses and teachers who have given useful advice."



Watch this space

Six schools in Richmond and Croydon have signed up to the study so far, and over 240 children were measured in three of these before Christmas.

"The main challenge in each school was finding an appropriate area to measure the children's heights and weights - each varied in the free space available. But with a little improvisation it has all run very smoothly! I've received fantastic support from all of the staff involved." says Chloe.

Feedback packs are now being developed for these pupils and will soon be sent to parents. So keep reading the newsletter for further updates.

CONFERENCE FEEDBACK: 10th International Congress on Obesity, Sydney, Australia, 3-8 September 2006, *By Susan Carnell*

Kangaroos, koalas, deadly spiders, and world-class obesity research. It turns out that all four of these are associated with Australia - but only one of them became strikingly apparent to me in September last year, when my research fellowship took me to Sydney for the International Congress on Obesity (ICO).

Spice and variety

After a spectacular opening ceremony taking in aboriginal dancing and opera in three different languages, delegates found themselves spoilt for choice. The following four and a half days were packed with talks on all areas of obesity research - ranging from biology and genetics, through epidemiology and public health, to applied clinical research on obesity treatment.

The delegate list was similarly varied, with everyone represented, from general therapists with an interest in obesity to the most dedicated cell biologists and molecular geneticists.



Susan Carnell

Cutting edge genetics

The multi-disciplinary coverage of ICO (which takes place only once every 4 years), makes it a great conference to combine your own interests with an introduction to something new. And this year I particularly enjoyed learning more about genetic influences on weight.

Sadaf Farooqi gave a fascinating talk on cases of obesity caused by single gene defects, and Andrew Prentice broke down the concept of the 'thrifty gene' - making a persuasive case for re-christening it the

'greedy gene' to reflect growing evidence that modern obesity is driven by appetite.

One of the most exciting areas of obesity research at the moment is the largely uncharted territory of 'epigenetics', and Emma Whitelaw gave a masterful explanation of how environmental influences can leave a mark on our genes which could work to increase our risk of obesity.

What's more, the fact that this can happen quite

independent of our inherited DNA raises the possibility that epigenetic effects could

partly explain why obesity has increased so much in the population - despite genes remaining the same. The audience was left eager to hear of new developments in this burgeoning field.

Advances in diet and activity

Another hot topic in obesity research is how weight can be linked to physical features in the environment, and expert Larry Frank highlighted the key mediating role of people's attitudes to their environment, particular in terms of physical activity. For example: it doesn't matter how 'walkable' your neighbourhood is - if you don't prefer active places, you'll still jump in the car.

Representing the dietary contingent,

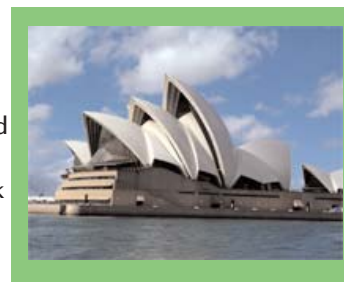
Susan Jebb gave a typically balanced, comprehensive review of the contribution of soft drinks to the obesity epidemic.

But perhaps the most controversial session was not a talk, but a debate -



Enjoying the Oz and 'Ob' Experience: a view of Sydney Harbour Bridge

Motion: that the health consequences of overweight and obesity are overstated. Steve Blair was perhaps the most outspoken participant among the expert panel, and argued fervently that many people are both 'fat and fit'.



Sydney Opera House

News from the home team

In stark contrast to the more frequent U.S. obesity conferences, the vast majority of attendees were from Australia or

New Zealand. So ICO was a great showcase for the wealth of research from this part of the world.

Jo Salmon gave a clear review of environmental changes seeking to increase physical activity in children. She highlighted the importance of broad influences like family structure, but also more specific factors - such as having a mother who emphasised the importance of family time.

Later in the programme, David Crawford described the mixed evidence on the link between fast food outlets and weight. Picking out another crucial behaviour, Karen Campbell added to the Australian tour de force, speaking about the possibility of using TV viewing as an indicator of unhealthy lifestyle behaviours.

Arriving back in the UK after my global tour of obesity research, I felt my horizons thoroughly expanded - not only intellectually, but geographically too!

RESEARCH ROUND-UP

OVARIAN CANCER WORSE FOR OBESE WOMEN

Obese women with ovarian cancer are more likely to die from it, finds a new study of 216 women, published in the journal *Cancer*.

They are also likely to die earlier than normal weight women with the same condition, and cancer is more likely to recur following treatment.

Part of the explanation could be that chemotherapy doses were not adjusted correctly to account for additional body weight, highlighting the need for greater understanding of how to modify treatments according to weight.

However, the researchers also suggest that fat tissue could excrete a hormone and protein that causes ovarian cancer cells to grow more aggressively. They plan to investigate these mechanisms in future work.

Source: Effect of obesity on survival in epithelial ovarian cancer. Pavelka JC, Brown RS, Karlan BY, Cass I, Leuchter RS, Lagasse LD, Li AJ. *Cancer*, 2006, 107 (1520-1524).

RESEARCH ROUND-UP

'DESIRED WEIGHT' TRACKS 'ACTUAL WEIGHT'

As adults become heavier, so too does the weight they aspire to be.

In a recent study, over 700,000 adults reported their actual and ideal weights in five telephone surveys between 1994 and 2000.

Mean desired weight - although still considerably lower than actual weight - mirrored the 3.9kg increase in mean reported weight, increasing by 2.3kg.

Most overweight participants

expressed achievable desired weights, involving around 5% weight loss. But obese participants had unrealistic aims of 15-25% weight loss.

These findings could indicate increase acceptance of a larger body size in the US.

Source: Secular trends in desired weight of adult. Maynard LM, Serdula MK, Galuska DA, Gillespie C, Mokdad AH. International Journal of Obesity, 2006, 30(1375-1381).

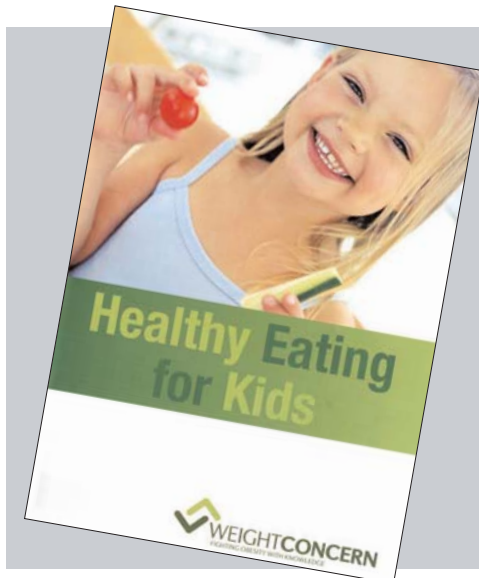
PARENT POWER: New Weight Concern booklets lend a helping hand

Bringing up children to be healthy and active is no easy business, and at Weight Concern we believe parents deserve help and support, not blame.

So our expert team have created two new booklets, packed with tried and tested tips to make parents' lives easier.

Your questions answered

The two new resources - 'Healthy Eating for Kids' and 'Healthy Active Kids' - are



designed to help parents make healthy changes to all aspects of family life.

Anyone who has wondered "How do I encourage my children to eat fruit and vegetables?", "How can I make exercise more fun?" or "What can I do to cut down TV viewing?" will find some answers here.

'Healthy Eating for Kids' (left) gives useful advice on all aspects of healthy diets, including how to eat regularly, eat a healthy mix of foods and eat sensible quantities. It also includes lots of ideas for healthy snacks and meals, and tips on how to read food labels and what choices to make when eating out.

Its companion, 'Healthy Active Kids' (right), takes a step by step approach to encouraging physical activity, describing how to start by reducing time spent doing sedentary activity, moving onto increasing everyday activity, and finally thinking about increasing organised activities or sports.

All are informed by the best scientific evidence, together with Weight Concern's extensive clinical experience. Health professionals working with children and families will find it an indispensable resource.



How to order

The pair of booklets costs £5, including postage and packing. To order a set, either log onto www.weightconcern.org.uk, or send your details with a cheque payable to Weight Concern, to the address at the foot of the page.

If you would like to make a bulk order, please phone us directly on 0207 679 6636.

FRESH FACES

Weight Concern is delighted to welcome **Chloe Grimmett** to the team.

After graduating in Sports and Exercise from the University of Bath, Chloe spent one year at Loughborough University, working on a national project investigating sedentary behaviours in adults.

She spent the following year at the University of Birmingham, researching the use of exercise to aid post-natal depression and IBS (irritable bowel syndrome).

And now Chloe is running Weight Concern's study on the feasibility and impact of giving parents feedback on their children's weight status. The



Chloe Grimmett

project is now well underway and you can read more about Chloe's achievements so far on p4.

We would also like to extend a big thank you to **Dr Lucy Stirling**, on behalf of all at the charity.

Lucy graduated in Experimental Psychology from the University of Sussex. She then spent one year

researching anxiety and depression in children, and another as an assistant psychologist. Lucy recently qualified as a Clinical Psychologist from the South



Dr Lucy Stirling

Thames (Salomons) Doctoral Programme.

During four months with Weight Concern last year, Lucy was instrumental

in developing materials for the Shape-Up Weight Maintenance Programme (watch this space for further news), helped run Shape-Up training sessions all over the country.

She also contributed psychological expertise to numerous other Weight Concern projects, not to mention the Weight Concern team itself!

We wish Lucy every success in her new clinical post.

You started your career in the 1970s as a PE (Physical Education) teacher. What made you move into research?

I suppose I figured there was a lot more that could be done in physical education than just teaching sport.

So I and my colleagues put together a new PE curriculum called Health-related Fitness in a comprehensive school in Leicestershire. The aim was to focus on youngsters as individuals - their health, strength, flexibility, and why cardiovascular fitness was important throughout life.

We also expanded the activity choices beyond hockey and football to include new things like aerobics - or 'Popmobility' as it was called at the time! The youngsters absolutely loved it.

At this point I was very keen to learn more, so I went to America to study with Chuck Corbin - a professor who had written several key texts on the topic. Then I came back to the same school and put some of the ideas into action.

How much did exercising to manage weight and health generally come into PE back then?

Weight was a fundamental component of our curriculum but we're talking about the early 80s here when obesity was only an issue for a small minority.

Nonetheless I suppose you could say my career is really built on the 'health needy'. I've always been very interested in how we could help weaker or fatter kids - and indeed adults - get into activity, and how you can get kids motivated to exercise.

PE has improved a lot since then, but the amount of training for PE teachers has actually declined. There's still a heavy focus on those who perform sports well, and, with the best of intentions, some teachers still think sport is the answer to the whole world's problems. I'm still trying to persuade teachers how to work more effectively to help the whole range of youngsters.

Do you think that staging the 2012 Olympics will have a positive influence on the nation's activity?

Well I think this brings up a very interesting debate. The 2012 Olympics was largely won on the notion of a legacy - that it would create a new generation of healthy, motivated children.

But actually, why would it? Why would watching high level performances in the the Olympics motivate anyone but a very small band of talented youngsters with serious athletic or sports-related aspirations?

In reality it may convince the less active and able that there is little in it for them, and create more sedentary living through watching TV!

Engaging with the Experts

Professor Ken Fox is an internationally recognised expert in physical activity and obesity. A full-time lecturer at the University of Bristol, he also advises government on obesity policy.

We asked Professor Fox about the relationship between physical activity and weight, and explored his thoughts on how to get the nation moving.



Professor Ken Fox

There is an intuitive but uninformed belief among many who are absorbed in sport that good things in sport will translate into public health benefits but I can't identify a single psychological mechanism that would make this happen. They could even make things worse because people will rightly think these achievements are unattainable for them.

My suggestion would be to take all our successful athletes post- or pre-Olympics and launch a well-thought-out national campaign saying there's other reasons to be active than winning Olympic golds.

You don't have to be able to leap over a 7 foot high bar. What you need to do is improve your basic fitness, get out and be active, walk more and watch your weight, and keep it up throughout your life - not just for the season.

What's more important - diet or physical activity?

I refuse to answer that question because the media constantly try to create an emotive and polaric debate. Of course the answer is absolutely both are critical!

What we need to get people thinking about is how they can achieve a healthy energy balance. In fact, it's actually dangerous to talk about only one half of the equation.

For example: take a highly trained athlete. He or she might actually have to supplement their diet to get enough energy in because they're burning up to 7000 calories a day.

In contrast, a 16 year old girl might eat virtually nothing and do no activity. That's really unhealthy, of course, and she will be storing up all kinds of future problems.

Now the athlete may have what looks like a sky-high intake, but it's in balance with his or her activity and seems to me to be a much better approach - lots of good healthy food and a fit, highly-tuned body.

Is it possible to be fat and fit?

Yes. I think that's undeniably true now, and it's a really good bit of news for those who are already struggling with their weight.

Statistics show that if you are fit as well as fat, you reduce your risk of mortality and most of the main sources of morbidity - diabetes, heart disease, some cancers too.

It's also a myth that everyone who's fat is unhealthy - a BMI of over 27 simply puts you at an increased risk of ill health.

Prospective, predictive data from the Aerobic Research Institute in Dallas shows that many women with BMIs between 30 and 35 don't have any risk factors - they're actually quite healthy and many are quite fit.

So what you can say to people is: If you really can't get your weight down, at least make sure you're active. In fact, it's probably even more important to be active if you are overweight. And it's a myth that you can't get fit as a fat person - you can.

What sort of activities would you recommend for people who are overweight?

Carrying extra weight means extra work on the joints, so you do have to be careful, and avoid things like impact aerobics or vigorous sports such as squash. What you're looking for is rhythmic movements using large muscle groups such as the arms and legs.

Cycling is good. And the activity has to be something regular, so walking is an obvious, accessible and effective choice. The key is to build up gradually, setting and achieving short-term goals. For example you can start to include slopes and hills and to go greater distances - the harder you work, the quicker you burn calories.

One positive point is that you burn more calories the heavier you are. But you must be careful to give your body time to adjust to the extra work. Build up over a period of weeks and listen to what your body says.

Walking an hour a day can make a big difference. An hour can sound like a lot to some people but if you really want to tackle your weight problem you're going to have to commit to it. And an hour doesn't have to be done in one go; you can start by doing it

(cont. on p8)

Engaging with the Experts (cont. from p7)

in parts - half an hour in the morning, half an hour in the evening, or even 10 minutes a time throughout the day.

It's true that body image worries can put larger people off exercising, but I think a lot of them have faced up to the fact that if you want to lose weight you just have to do it.

Wearing inconspicuous clothes and choosing less busy times to exercise can help. I'd also like to see more access to exercise specialists and health centres, to provide people with the support they need.

What's your view of the government's plan to introduce 'health trainers'?

In principle it's a great idea but I'm disappointed that it looks like they will not be fully trained professionals.

The government is understandably keen to encourage the voluntary sector, but my view is this: We're churning out over 1000 exercise and sports science graduates a year. So why not engage them in health training as a kind of early grade career position?

People could phone up and book an appointment, and qualified health trainers could help them get started with exercise. I think graduates would relish the opportunity to do one-on-one work in the community.

What role should schools have in increasing activity among children?

There's no single thing that schools can do that will solve the obesity problem. So I'm very much in favour of the notion of a healthy, active school - with the right bank of strategies and policies to create a strong ethos of physical activity.

I've always argued we should take care not to think that PE is the whole answer. Even the best PE programme doesn't take up more than 1% of children's waking time, so how on earth can you solve a child's activity problems in that time frame?

That's not to say that PE is not important, but it must be used wisely to educate and motivate youngsters to be active throughout their daily lives. It's also really important to get the whole school on board - for example, by forming a committee to improve activity in both staff and youngsters.

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Our own work at Bristol shows that kids who walk to school are more active throughout the whole day. So encouraging safe routes to school should be a priority. And for younger children we need to encourage active play - for example, by designing playgrounds differently and making residential localities safe for play again.

And why not run inter-mural sports at lunchtime, rather than limiting provision to inter-school matches after school that involve a very small percentage of youngsters? With 5-a-side you can have 4 games going on, refereed by 6th form students. It's cheaper, easier to organise, and gets many more kids involved.

Do you also think parents have a role to play?

I think that's actually a really important and neglected area, because one major barrier to making some of these policy changes happen is parents' perceptions and attitudes.

Playing outside or walking to school are important ways to expend energy, but parents are worried about traffic, abduction, bullying, and so on.

Some of these fears are founded and require environmental changes - safe play areas have started to reach the planning agenda at last. But we also have to help parents deal with perceived risk.

I'm a parent myself and probably know more about physical activity and nutrition than most, but it has still been challenging to get parenting right. We need to provide education to help parents learn how they can get their kids to eat the right foods and be more active.

What's more important in terms of public health - 'lifestyle' or 'deliberate' exercise?

There's no simple answer. But I certainly don't think we can rely totally on the magic pill approach where we visit the gym for our 30 minute dose of exercise. It's a bit Orwellian - like providing exercise wheels for mice in cages!

We would need at least 100 times more gyms and leisure centres than we already have. And evidence suggests that increasing health clubs and sports centres would actually increase inequalities - because they do not attract the health needy sector.

To find the solution we have to look back in time and ask what has changed to make us less active than we were? It doesn't seem that we're playing less sport - and probably the middle classes are doing more.

But National Transport statistics clearly show that we're walking less. There are very few active jobs. Technology means

that the hard work is done for us in most sectors of life now. And sedentary entertainment is more available and more attractive.

We need to look closely at how we design towns and urban areas. For example, we need to look at how 'out of town' shopping affects activity. We need to investigate what is making us rely on the car and what is making it difficult to cycle and walk. And we need to look at public transport to try to 'incentivise' walking and cycling, while 'deincentivising' the car.

What do you think will happen in terms of physical activity research and policy over the next few years?

I think the field is really starting to move forwards. For example, until recently it has been incredibly difficult to get reliable estimates of diet, or energy intake.

But we're starting to overcome that in the case of physical activity, or energy expenditure, mainly through the use of accelerometry and other interesting gadgets such as global positioning sensing. This is giving us a much better idea of not only what people are doing, but where they're doing it.

So soon we will be able to show that if you design places in a specific way, it will have specific effects on physical activity.

And this reflects a general broadening of the focus of physical activity research to look at the socio-environmental determinants of physical activity, rather than individual and motivational factors alone.

In terms of policy, my hope is that the healthy, active schools idea will take on greater prominence, and that this will be coupled with parental support - because that's the heart of the problem.

The two areas where youngsters spend most of their time are in school and at home. But we can't expect people to make 'active' choices if we don't make localities and neighbourhoods more 'active friendly'.

This requires careful consideration of how we design and manage our built environment and our transport systems. The activity side of the obesity equation is very dependent on us getting this right.

A big thank you... On behalf of everyone here at Weight Concern we would like to extend our grateful thanks to all those who lend us their support.

And do let us know your views on this newsletter or any aspect of our work - we would love to hear your feedback.