

May 28, 2008

Hawai'i must redouble war on child obesity

Childhood obesity is often described these days as an epidemic, but too often our healthcare system doesn't treat it as a disease.

Among the important measures of our nation's wellness, the problem of overweight kids is reaching a critical threshold. Our children could be the first generation to have a shorter life span than their parents.

We should waste no time in turning this tide. Obesity is producing skyrocketing rates of associated illnesses, such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. But in an unconscionable failure to confront the looming crisis, medical professionals often don't deal with the problem until disease is already present.

Health insurance plans vary in how they handle the issue. Managed-care plans provide more services aimed at early intervention, but most families are left to cover the costs of seeking expert help if there's no sign of disease.

There are exceptions, of course. For example, the Hawaii Medical Services Association has outreach programs in schools and the community, and one of its health plans has a "teen health pass," an annual workup that offers the adolescent a lifestyle-changing guidance.

But there's less help for younger children, which is counterintuitive. Unhealthy habits — the source of many illnesses — begin early in life.

It's a concern of the Pediatric Foundation of Hawaii, which, along with the American Academy of Pediatrics' Hawai'i chapter and funds from HMSA Foundation, has launched an effort to give doctors and families help through a new toolkit for pediatricians.

The kit provides health-history questionnaires for patients and parents. It also includes very practical suggestions on portion sizes — an essential element in all weight-control programs — and ideas on boosting physical activity.

This is an acutely needed resource for doctors, whose efforts should be backed by insurance providers.

These companies need to examine their policies on covering referrals to behavior-modification services. It's an investment that's sure to pay off in better health for our keiki in the long term. Who can argue with that?
