AMA declares obesity a disease

By ACSH Staff — June 19, 2013

Following their annual meeting, the American Medical Association has decided to classify obesity as a disease. This has the potential to affect the way society views obesity, although the influence of the AMA ends there, as they do not have any official say in this matter. Among the supporters of this declaration are the American Academy of Family Physicians, the American Heart Association and the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, who state that obesity is a multimetabolic and hormonal disease.

The AMA hopes that by classifying obesity as a disease, the medical community will change its approach towards dealing with this public health issue. They also believe that the government and the private sector will become more involved and invested in developing treatments for obesity, as well as begin to provide reimbursement for these treatments. They also hope that, similar to what happened with the public health efforts aimed at reducing smoking, this declaration will make it easier for policymakers to implement changes in policies geared towards preventing or reducing obesity. Anti-smoking public health efforts really began with the groundbreaking U.S. Surgeon General’s 1964 report showing that smoking caused lung cancer and other diseases, which led to bans on smoking in public places, taxes on tobacco products and eventually reductions in smoking rates.

However, the other side of the argument being made by those who do not support this new classification is that by declaring obesity a disease, people may believe that it is no longer their responsibility to watch their diets and their weight since they have a disease, and begin to expect that a pill will be developed to cure obesity, as is the case with other diseases.

After discussing this new classification, ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan brought up the question of whether we should now be thinking about also classifying smoking as a disease. Smoking is a risk factor for disease, obesity is a risk factor for disease. It seems to me that the characteristics used to classify obesity as a disease could also be applied to smoking.

To which Dr. Gilbert Ross responded, Well addiction is a disease, I believe most scientists and physicians would agree. So I do agree, smoking is a disease as well as a risk factor, like obesity.