

Bill Richardson for President

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Speech to The Obesity Society

09/19/2007

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- [Speech to The Obesity Society 09/19/2007](#)

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Thank you for that kind introduction President Eric Ravussin. It's all true.

First and foremost, I wanted to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Morgan Downey and the membership of the Obesity Society for inviting me to this conference. It's a pleasure to be with all of you today.

I'd also like to thank Ms. Christine Ferguson and the other faculty members of the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, and the STOP Obesity Alliance for helping to organize this conference.

And I would like to thank YOU, the conference attendees, for the hard work you are doing to solve this critical public health problem that affects so many lives.

I noticed that none of the other presidential candidates are here today. I know they may not weigh as much as I do, but I still think you should have invited them.

But, in all seriousness, it's a shame they couldn't join us. No matter their weight, every American is affected by this quiet epidemic.

As we all know, the prevalence of obesity in this country has skyrocketed in recent years. Nearly 200 million Americans - two-thirds of our population -- are now considered overweight or obese.

The effects of this disease are not cosmetic. Millions of Americans are suffering from the effects of obesity-related illnesses. We spend at least \$97 billion per year on health care needs to combat obesity. Our current course is unhealthy, it is unsustainable, and, frankly, it is unconscionable.

Make no mistake about it -- this is a critical problem that has the potential to become a nationwide crisis. We must deal with this problem before it is too late. We as a country need to have some long-term vision. We can't afford to continue to put our communities and society at risk.

And I pledge to you that when I am President, we will fight obesity every day.

Our first step must be making sure that every American has access to affordable, quality health coverage. My health care plan provides a common-sense path to achieve that.

It focuses on the three critical issues of coverage, cost, and care. We build on proven programs that already work for millions of Americans, instead of building new bureaucracy. With my plan, working families and small businesses will be able to purchase the same coverage that members of Congress and the President have, and those aged 55 to 64 will be able to purchase coverage through Medicare.

All Americans will be required to have health care coverage, and employers will pay their fair share of employee health care costs. We'll make sure that proven preventive services are covered under every health plan, and we'll support quality initiatives -- like medical homes -- that treat the patient as a whole person and emphasize continuity of care -- critical to improving clinical care for conditions like obesity.

I encourage all of you to visit my website and review my health care plan in more detail at www.richardsonforpresident.com.

But helping all Americans obtain health coverage is only one part of a multi-prong strategy to beat obesity.

Our next President must take a prominent and public role, joining all of you in your efforts, to increase the public's

understanding of obesity and remove the stigma. We must help people understand that it is a disease, not a behavior. And that those of us who are overweight or obese are NOT lazy or undisciplined. We cannot allow Americans to be taken in by the easy comfort of stereotypes.

We must also eliminate discrimination of those who are overweight. This is an issue of basic civil rights. There are no federal laws that protect obese Americans from discrimination in the workplace, school, or anywhere else. This must change.

As President, I will work with Congress to include federal protections for the obese in the Americans with Disabilities Act and by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

We need to dramatically boost our research efforts associated with obesity and we need to involve the NIH, CDC, FDA, USDA, and others. The more we know about obesity, the more we know how to prevent and treat it. It is imperative that we better understand what works to help overweight and obese people improve their health.

Perhaps the most critical part of what our next President must do, however, is to drastically shift our focus from the endgame to the pre-game. That means a serious investment in prevention. A wise man once said that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of the cure." Apparently, this age-old wisdom has not yet made its way to Washington.

Take diabetes for example. Obesity is one of its greatest contributing risk factors. Our federal government spends 80 billion dollars per year to treat diabetes, but only 4 billion to prevent and manage the disease. There are already many proven strategies for preventing and managing diabetes and other obesity-related illnesses, but unfortunately these are not reaching enough Americans. We've got to change that.

Research shows that prevention is what can help young Americans the most. You know, many health care experts are telling us that our own children could be the first generation of Americans who do not outlive their parents. That is an ugly and awful break with America's historic promise of a better tomorrow and it is unacceptable.

Much of this is due to the fact that an astonishing 17% of our children are overweight and therefore, more of them are developing what have been considered "adult diseases" -- high blood pressure, type II diabetes, heart disease, and asthma.

As Governor of New Mexico, I've attacked this problem head-on. In my state, we've regulated vending machines in schools and we've worked to ensure that children have access to a healthy breakfast. We've taken the junk food out of our schools and we're putting physical education back in. And it's working.

Last year, the Center for Science and the Public Interest ranked New Mexico 2nd for food availability and 4th nationally for its strong nutrition policy.

It is essential that we address obesity throughout the lives of our citizens -- especially at key moments when weight gain is most likely.

Another generation of students is starting college right about now, and it's about time we made the "Freshman 15" a thing of the past -- through healthier cafeteria food, more opportunities for exercise, and better educational programs.

We also need to ask adults to consider what they can do within their own lives to reduce obesity and its effects. Obesity is not a behavior, but we can adopt lifestyle choices -- such as exercising and eating right - that can mitigate obesity and obesity-related diseases.

Of course, many Americans do care about their weight and their health -- this is not just about willpower.

Americans and their doctors need the right tools, information, and incentives to make healthy choices and treatment decisions -- and that means that the food and fitness industries, the insurance companies, the schools and government, the individuals and families, all have to do their part. If we work together, we can end this epidemic.

I'm proud of my record as Governor in fighting obesity in New Mexico, particularly in helping my state's children. We need to take solid, bold steps to address this problem at the national level, and I look forward to working with all of you to make it happen.

Thank you very much.

2006 dollars, based on Finkelstein et al. <http://content.healthaffairs.org/cgi/reprint/hlthaff.w3.219v1.pdf>, US Department of Labor Inflation Calculator, <http://www.bls.gov/cpi/>

"One of Every Eight Federal Health Care Dollars - \$80 Billion - Goes to Provide Care for People With Diabetes, New Study Shows", PR Newswire, June 19, 2007.

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