

value of these new definitions. We believe the important finding in our study is that the prevalence of childhood overweight or obesity, however defined, is increasing rapidly. Katzmarzyk points out that when using the method proposed by Cole and colleagues,<sup>13</sup> the magnitude of the problem may be smaller than we reported, but the rate of change of the problem may in fact be larger than we reported. Difficulties in establishing acceptable definitions for childhood overweight and obesity are not new.<sup>14</sup> The findings in Katzmarzyk's letter will facilitate future research in this area.

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#### [The commentator responds:]

Roland Auer and colleagues assert that when attempting to explain the current increase in the prevalence of obesity, "the exercise factor must pale when compared with the massive caloric intake we 'enjoy' in Canada." Excess energy intake is no doubt a contributing factor to the increasing girth of Canadian youth. However, to contend that the increasing prevalence of obesity is solely due to gluttony may oversimplify this complex problem.<sup>1</sup> For example, Prentice and Jebb reported that the prevalence of obesity doubled from 1980 to 1990 in Britain.<sup>2</sup> During this time, energy intake declined substantially; the implication is that levels of physical activity, and hence energy needs, declined even faster. Interestingly, these authors reported that the changing prevalence of obesity was tightly related to sedentariness, hours of television watched and the number of cars per household; they concluded that inactive lifestyles are at least as important as diet in causing obesity, and possibly represent the dominant factor.<sup>2</sup> Physical inactivity also may be a cue for eating in some children. My colleagues and I recently reported that US children who watch 5 or more hours of television per day consume 175 kcal/d more than those who watch at most 1 hour per day.<sup>3</sup>

Auer and colleagues also note that chronic caloric restriction has been demonstrated to increase longevity in other species. Translating findings in animal models to humans remains problematic. Most people have difficulty maintaining even a moderately restricted diet for any length of time.

Physicians must understand that obesity is caused by a complex interaction of genetics, diet, activity levels and behaviours. Long-term weight management will likely be achieved in overweight patients who learn to set realistic goals, change the behaviours that have led them to become overweight, increase their levels of physical activity and simultaneously engage in sound dietary practices.

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#### D is for drug addiction—and disability

The *CMAJ* editors deserve praise for their searing editorial on the Ontario government's plan to implement mandatory drug testing for welfare recipients.<sup>1</sup> The editorial states (sarcastically) that "Only those with a gift for illogic would question the extension of the drug testing program to people on disability assistance whose only disability is drug addiction." The Ontario government need not worry. Under the Ontario Disability Support Program Act, 1997, people are not recognized as having a disability if they are addicted and the only substantial reduction in activities of daily living is due to the use of the addictive substance. A diagnosis of a substance-related disorder by a medical practitioner does not constitute a "substantial mental or physical impairment" under the Act. According to the Ontario plan, the government

will be mandating treatment for people whose addiction is not recognized as a disability under current welfare legislation.

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**Reference**

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**Fie on this book review**

Such snobbery for V.S. Naipaul and Vincent Hanlon to peer down their noses at mere correspondents.<sup>1</sup> "At the end of the day there remains something unsettling about a well written book that grew out of the stories, pictures and transient relationships of an overseas development writer and his subjects," Hanlon writes in reviewing John Stackhouse's *Out of Poverty and into Something More Comfortable*. Fie on the mercenary scrivener for penning an account of good things happening in developing countries just so he can try to turn a penny. Of course, Hanlon forgets that flood of suffocating mail he receives daily asking for aid, which suggests that donations are resulting in some of the optimism that Stackhouse has highlighted.

It is surprising that Naipaul, who influenced Hanlon, planted the seed that William Howard Russel wrote his reports on the Crimean War and the 1875 mutiny in India to line his pockets rather than to tell it as it was. History shows that Russel's reports changed the course of the war by describing the terrible state of British administration. This should have alerted both Naipaul and Hanlon that the truth, no matter

where it appears, can lead to good results. People like Russel and Stackhouse have had a direct influence on the *New Internationalist*, which Hanlon praises so highly, because their type of investigative reporting is what makes that journal highly desirable. If Stackhouse had published in that magazine, would Hanlon have suggested that the reader get the information at the library rather than buying the magazine?

**Charles M. Godfrey**

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**Reference**

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**[The author responds:]**

Charles Godfrey considers me mean-spirited for suggesting that readers not purchase John Stackhouse's well written account but read a library copy instead.<sup>1</sup> I recently had a conversation with a proprietor of a bed and breakfast establishment about the art of earning a living. She remarked insightfully, "Yes, it's about money, but it's not all about money." Some could argue that John Stackhouse has already been reasonably well remunerated for the 8 years he spent gathering and filing his stories.

Stackhouse challenges the stereotypical view of hopelessness as the defining fact of existence for the anonymous, impoverished billions on the planet. The basis for his measured optimism rests with the individuals he portrays who have not only hope, but names and identities. Many of the people he writes about achieve modest success in their daily struggles to find meaningful work, to feed and educate their children and to build strong communities, despite what most of us would see as a serious lack of cash.

By extension, the people Stackhouse describes, such as Amma and Sindaiga Sabar, defy us, readers of books and fellow human beings, to examine our own lives. Do we share their common goals? What degree of human solidarity is possible across the oceans that separate rich and poor? How shall it be expressed?

Stackhouse's valuable contribution to the development debate — his "truth," to use Godfrey's word — should be available in community lending libraries and on the Web. Given the major theme of the work, such a distribution scheme seems to me a natural and low-cost alternative to the personal acquisition of not just this text, but many other books and magazines, including the *New Internationalist*. I agree with Godfrey that the truth will appear in unexpected places. And eventually that truth may set all of us free. Meanwhile, we shouldn't stop asking the question, How shall we best spend our limited resources of energy, time and money?

**Vincent M. Hanlon**

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**Reference**

1. Hanlon V. Developmental reading. *CMAJ* 2001;164(2):237-8.

**Correction**

The affiliation of Susan Tamblyn was described incorrectly in a recent news item.<sup>1</sup> Tamblyn, the former chair of Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunization, is the Medical Officer of Health at the Perth District Health Unit in Stratford, Ont.

**Reference**

1. Sibbald B. Travel warning issued after polio outbreak in Dominican Republic, Haiti. *CMAJ* 2001;164(7):1033.