OBESITY

PREFACE

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Guest Editor

Obesity is one of the most common medical problems affecting Americans today, and certainly the most common nutritional disorder in North America. Despite the frequency with which clinicians encounter this disorder, little emphasis is placed on training physicians to deal with this complex group of patients. The explosion of new information regarding both the etiology and treatment of obesity that has appeared in the last ten years will hopefully be incorporated into the health profession's approach to this problem in the near future.

Ten years ago many of the recommendations for treatment of obese patients were based largely on opinion and anecdotal experience. Weight loss in obese patients was seen as an end unto itself, the assumption being that once the patients had lost weight they would be able to keep it off. We now know this is shortsighted, and that the real challenge is in maintaining a lower weight/healthier lifestyle over time. Ten years ago much less was known about the pathophysiology of obesity-related complications, or the interactions between genetic predisposition to weight gain and the environment. Although significant progress has been made in the scientific understanding of the pathophysiology and treatment of obesity, we remain in an environment that is creating obesity at unprecedented rates. The result will undoubtedly be an increase in healthcare needs of these individuals in the coming years.

In this issue of the *Medical Clinics of North America*, we have begun with articles that provide background information regarding the problem of obesity and its pathophysiology. These articles are followed by a series of contributions that deal with specific issues to aid clinicians in evaluating and managing patients in their practice. The scientific rationale for providing sound diet recommendations is provided, as are the practical tips on how to increase the physical activity level of obese patients. The appropriate role of obesity pharmacotherapy, behavior modification, and surgery for the severely obese patient are described. Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of public health approaches to this problem are covered.

As physicians we are bombarded with new claims for effectiveness of diets and drugs for the treatment of our obese patients. Patients themselves want to
know what they can realistically expect from the latest diet or drug. The goal of this issue is to provide physicians with a firm, scientific background to evaluate the claims and counter-claims being made with respect to the problem of obesity and its management. Although obesity is beginning to be recognized as a public health problem, until effective public health interventions are developed, physicians will need to deal with their patients on an individual basis. Hopefully, the information provided in this issue will assist physicians in that task.

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