Shame on You

America has an obesity problem. The National Institutes of Health defines an obese person as having a body mass index (BMI) 30 or above. "The BMI, a key index for relating body weight to height, is a person's weight in kilograms (kg) divided by their height in meters (m) squared. Since the BMI describes the body weight relative to height, it correlates strongly (in adults) with the total body fat content."[1] As of September 2015, "rates of obesity now exceed 35 percent in three states (Arkansas, West Virginia and Mississippi), 22 states have rates above 30 percent, 45 states are above 25 percent, and every state is above 20 percent."[2] These statistics raise significant health concerns, since obesity can lead to type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and other health risks.[1]

Despite diet fads, diet pills, and education efforts in schools, our obesity problem is not going away. As a result, some have turned to "fat shaming," or shaming people for appearing to be overweight, to get them to lose weight. For example, in September 2015, comedian Nicole Arbour posted a video on YouTube and Facebook called, "Dear Fat People" featuring lines such as, "Fat people parking spots should be in the back...Walk to the doors. Burn some calories," as well as lines such as, "You have one body...It has to take you all the way to the end... If you want to be positive to your body, work out, eat well."[3] This video received mixed reviews. Critics argued that it would not help people to live healthy lives but would rather only make them feel bad and contribute to a culture that oppresses them. In contrast, supporters argued that there is a link between eating too much, exercising too little, and bad health, and that comedians should be free to "tell it like it is" rather than be politically correct all the time.
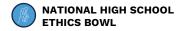
Similarly, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta recently sponsored an advertising campaign called, "Stop Sugarcoating It," featuring photos of obese children with accompanying taglines such as, "Warning ... It's hard to be a little girl if you're not," and "Big Bones Didn't Make Me This Way ... Big Meals Did."[4] According to Bioethicist Daniel Callahan, this approach can be good when it involves "social pressure combined with vigorous government action," as with campaigns to stop smoking.[5] Callahan claims that he quit smoking as a result of social criticism together with heavy taxation.

Therefore, he argues, why should we approach obesity any differently? Callahan calls for "mild coercion" by the government, like bans on soda sizes or taxes on sugary snacks, along with what he has termed "stigmatization lite." This light shaming, he thinks, will motivate people to ask questions like, "Are you happy that your added weight has made many ordinary activities, such as walking up a long flight of stairs, harder?" or "Are you aware that, once you gain a significant amount of weight, your chances of taking that weight back off and keeping it off are poor?" Yet critics worry that these campaigns will not help obese people to live happy and healthy lives, but will rather simply promote negative attitudes about them, as well as about other people who appear to be overweight.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Do we have a moral obligation not to cause unnecessary harm or offense? Why or why not?
2. Is there a moral difference between a comedian engaging in fat shaming and a hospital doing so? Why or why not?
3. If fat shaming has some good effects (such as preventing obesity in some cases) as well as some bad effects (such as causing eating disorders in some cases), how should we weigh these effects?

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[1] http://www.medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=11760

[2] http://stateofobesity.org/rates/

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXFgNhyP4-A

[4] http://www.phillymag.com/news/2012/10/12/solve-americas-obesity-problem-shame/

[5] http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/a-case-for-shaming-obese-people-tastefully/267446/