Our current thinking on obesity mainly focuses on direct causes (i.e. genetic and behavioural determinants of caloric intake and energy expenditure). Accordingly, genetic or metabolic predisposition and unhealthy lifestyle are seen as a suitable basis of preventive and treatment strategies. However, the present evidence suggests that these measures are not effective to tackle the obesity pandemic. To address population-wide obesity, we have to take into account other facets of obesity including food production and supply, income inequality, employment and quality of work, education, culture, globalization, urbanization, transition and westernization as well as economy [1]. Clearly, these determinants exceed medical thinking, and we have to enter a greater dimension of the obesity issue. This is a huge challenge for a scientific community dominated by the progress in biomedical research.

We all like to believe that medicine has or is to discover effective measures to tackle obesity. However, scientists have to be straightforward and open-minded. Imagine that, e.g. in Germany, we now have about 14 million obese people. There are considerable health inequalities, so are inequalities in overweight [2]. There is a clear link between social condition and obesity: the less favoured people are the higher their body weight. These health gradients exist in part independently of behavioural patterns suggesting further determinants including stress [2]. Faced with the high prevalence and the impact of socioeconomic conditions, obesity cannot be sufficiently addressed by medical thinking or any strategy of personalized medicine. Obesity is about population health, it is a public health issue.

What does this mean? As the great Geoffrey Rose had already mentioned in 1992, ‘The radical strategy is to identify and if possible to remedy the underlying causes of our major health problems’ [3]. The essential determinants of health are mainly economic and social. Obviously, we need a broader view, new concepts, and new strategies to tackle obesity. Since obesity is not owned intellectually by one academic ‘constituency’, economists, ecologists, politicians, and other health scientists are welcome to enter the discussion on obesity. This is because effective strategies to stop and to reverse the obesity epidemic have to go beyond the individual and ‘require changes which involve the population as a whole’ [3].

Garry Egger’s and Boyd Swinburn’s new book entitled ‘Planet Obesity – How We Are Eating Ourselves and the Planet to Death’ is on the greater dimensions of obesity [4]. The title is provocative, and the book is an eye opener for those who are not familiar with the previous work of the authors as well as related issues. As the authors mentioned, ‘Obesity is a collateral damage in the battle for modernity, it’s an unintended, but unavoidable consequence of too much economic growth and simply a natural and inevitable biological response to living in a consumer-oriented democracy’. This is not really new [e.g. 5–7], but bringing together economic wellbeing, prosperity, human health (including population fatness and chronic disease), climate change, severe weather events, pollution and greenhouse gas emissions shifts our thoughts from the biological causes and health consequences of obesity to the cause of the causes of individual as well as environmental health damages.

Following the author’s view, obesity is the negative side of success and prosperity in our modern Western world. More consumption of food contributes to economic growth but also to overweight. To avoid the negative consequences does not mean fighting against economic growth, capitalism and its benefits. There is a positive relationship between growth and health up to a certain point, but excess consumption has negative effects. However, the present problem is about too much capitalism and its devastating effects on health and environment. Conceptually, obesity is not only due to positive energy balance but also reflects a loss in the balance between benefits and disadvantages of economic growth. From a population point of view disadvantages now exceed benefits, questioning the value of unfettered economic growth.

How could these ideas be converted into prevention of overweight? Going back the line of economic growth seems...
logical but is hard to do. However, Egger and Swinburn [4] do not leave us with a pessimistic view or even despair about the future. Changes can be made within capitalist economics. Improved education (with goes along with economic development), fairness and less income discrepancies (which is a matter of social justice), and, at the individual level, participation resulting in an increase in feeling of personal control are considered as indirect and effective measures against population obesity. A so-called steady-state economy ending the dilemma of never-ending growth is a long-term goal (i.e. prosperity without growth).

In addition economists and politicians also need to be aware of population health as a measure of success. However the idea is up to all people (including ourselves). Since our basic needs have long been met, never-ending consumerism is highly questionable. More personal responsibility and moderation has to become the future choice to avoid ‘eating ourselves and the planet to death’.

Garry Egger’s and Boyd Swinburn’s book [4] is food for thought for all scientists in the area of obesity research, but it is not the answer to all problems.

– First, the authors have provided alternative ideas exceeding our present view.

– Second, the authors also give rise to reflect our research issues. For example, dealing independently with the biological causes of weight gain and obesity without taking into account the contexts of daily living and the primary drivers of obesity such as economic growth, income inequality, politics and culture can give at best partial and, thus, very incomplete answers only. Taking this point, biological complexity (as frequently suggested to explain overwhelming or divergent data) are partly due to our limited concepts and research strategies. This is not against the value of biomedical research but in favour of new and complementary concepts.

– Third, we have to re-consider our treatment strategies. Weight loss drugs and measures of bariatric surgery without changes in lifestyle and living conditions do neither address the causes nor the cause of the causes of obesity. Thus, although they may cause weight loss they are misleading in face of the greater context of overweight (i.e. they tackle the surface without reaching the roots).

As scientists we have to admit that the present evidence base regarding effectiveness of obesity prevention and treatment is scarce. We also have no sufficient role model, and there are no scientifically based recommendations for politicians. Scientists have to accept that isolated approaches (e.g. in genomic research [8]) do not provide sufficient chances to improve our understanding of weight gain and obesity. Resistance on medical thinking may also neglect our strong corporate influence and, thus, our impact to tackle the obesity epidemic at a political and societal level. This idea is up to Geoffrey Rose again: ‘The primary determinants of disease are mainly economic and social, and therefore its remedies must also be economic and social. Medicine and politics cannot and should not be kept apart’ [3]. At present, our health as well as our food systems are under severe stress, and obesity is a true public health crisis. Old policy mixes do not address the needs of the society, environment, and health as do medical approaches to obesity. Current government initiatives are unlikely to have any measurable effect, so is the chance that a magic pill against overweight will be discovered one day.

As mentioned by Egger and Swinburn [4], business-as-usual or not really doing anything is unacceptable because it will result in a destruction of planet’s and human health. To go on, obesity has to become a hot topic of civil society organizations, and scientists should rise their voice in debating the links between health, environment, and social justice as well as what directions should emerge. Going this way may worry some of us since such a social movement may look like a transformation of the well established biomedical approach to obesity. However, the key is the first step, let the idea grow.

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