Why the Cost of Fast Food Matters

Mitchell H. Katz, MD

Readers may justifiably wonder why the Editors chose this article for publication in a clinical journal. After all, as clinicians we are hardly in a position to influence the price of fast food.

However, obesity is a serious problem among our patients, and we have few good clinical interventions. We want our patients to make good food choices. None of us want to nag or to live in a “nanny” state where food choices are legislated. Rather, as we say in public health (and at home), we want the healthful choice to be the easy choice.

Here is the economic problem. Fast food has been getting cheaper. As the authors show, when fast food is cheap, people choose it more often. Blacks and persons with less education were more sensitive to fast food price, indicating that low-cost fast food may be contributing to disparities in obesity rates.

What can anyone do about this? Changing food subsidies and taxation can be used to influence price. Instead of subsidizing corn syrup, these benefits should accrue to fruits and vegetables. In this way, the government is not telling people what to eat; it is just making it easier to make the right choice.

That is a policy that could have tremendous clinical benefit for our patients.