

*The 7 Deadly Sins of Obesity: How the Modern World is Making us Fat*

edited by Jane Dixon and Dorothy Broom

UNSW Press

Sydney, 2007

\$39.95, 240pp

ISBN 9780868409559

The idea that the modern world makes us fat is dangerously appealing. Appealing because it means that we are not to blame for our being overweight or obese. And dangerous because it suggests that we cannot choose to be healthy.

The core premise of *The 7 Deadly Sins of Obesity* is that obesity is the result of 'sinful' social, economic, cultural and physical environments, rather than individual behaviours.

The book is edited by sociologists Jane Dixon and Dorothy Broom, a fellow and senior fellow respectively at the ANU's National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health.

Based on a study of 50 Australian experts, Dixon and Broom identified seven 'obesogenic' trends, or 'sins of modern environments': (1) the commodified environment; (2) the harried environment; (3) the pressured parenting environment; (4) the technological environment; (5) the car-reliant environment; (6) the marketed environment; and (7) the environment of competing authorities.

The book gives each sin its own chapter and rounds out the buffet with an analysis of the social distribution of obesity.

In his chapter on the commodified environment, Richard Deniss, a strategic advisor

to the Australian Greens, argues that there are links between economic growth and rising levels of obesity. Deniss is particularly critical of the concept of 'non-satiety', which, he argues, pervades modern economic thought: 'Most economists assume explicitly that more is never enough, and that individual well-being is always enhanced when more is consumed compared to when less is consumed.'

To illustrate his point, he offers examples such as super-sized meals at fast food restaurants and special offers on chocolate bars at petrol stations. Curiously, he also refers to fitness centres that offer 12-month memberships for slightly more than the price of a three-month membership.

Deniss argues that marketing campaigns push people towards excessive food consumption and points the finger at materialism, consumer culture and the commodification of leisure. He suggests that policy solutions to obesity are likely to slow economic growth, and concludes that consumerist quick-fixes are much more profitable than genuine solutions.

In her analysis of the car-reliant environment, PhD candidate Sarah Hinde argues that 'The car has not only displaced alternative, healthier and more equitable forms of mobility; it has facilitated a system of values, industries and physical settings that promote consumption of high energy food and prevent physical activity.'

Although aspects of her contribution are intuitive, some of her tangents are a bit of a

stretch, including a suggestion that extreme car-related stress may lead to emotional over-eating.

Other parts of the book are similarly undermined by dubious reasoning or weak evidence. The chapter on 'the pressured parenting environment' includes a lengthy joke email received by one of the authors, as well as excessive anecdotal evidence about the cost of family outings in Canberra.

There are some niggling tensions, both within and between chapters. The likely root of these tensions is that many of the book's core contentions are founded in generalisation. For example, Hinde condemns the car as 'obesity promoting', but explicitly acknowledges its use to carry sporting equipment and to transport people out of the city 'to go bushwalking on weekends'.

In contrast to the more amorphous parts of the book, Julie Smith's chapter on 'the marketed environment' provides a thorough and thoughtful commentary on the links between infant feeding practices and obesity. Her contribution resonates strongly, largely because of its specificity.

On the whole, the latter chapters are much stronger.

In their exploration of the social distribution of obesity, Dr Sharon Friel and Broom are upfront in presuming an inverse relationship between socio-economic position and obesity (along with other health problems). They provide evidence of correlations between rates of obesity and education, employment and Indigenous status.

When statistics about the relationship between obesity and income level are broken down



according to gender, the predicted inverse relationship is observed for women (that is, women with a higher income are less likely to be obese). But the same is not true for men. In fact, some studies suggest that men on greater incomes are more likely to be obese.

Worked into the book's core premise is the commendable idea that it is unhelpful to moralise about weight, and that it is wrong to cast obese individuals as slothful and gluttonous.

On the other hand, it is facile to characterise people as hapless victims of sinful environments. The book's conclusion expressly acknowledges that individuals are not helpless. Still, it maintains that 'Unhealthy weight is a problem of the body politic rather than a problem only of individual bodies.'

Perhaps the best hope of curbing the obesity crisis exists in the possibility of attributing responsibility without moral judgment, and of recognising that choices may be very difficult, without being impossible.

**Reviewed by Jess Moir**

*A Charter of Rights for Australia*

by **George Williams**

UNSW Press

Sydney, 2007

\$16.95, 96pp

ISBN 9780868409269

**A** *Charter of Rights for Australia* is part of the 'Briefings' series of essays, which set out to provide basic explanations of contemporary political issues. Unfortunately, Williams largely eschews his obligation to explain and settles quickly into a lazy polemic in support of a Commonwealth bill of rights.

The shame is that Williams, a bill of rights advocate over a number of years, has the potential to bring a great deal of learning and experience to the issue. A Sydney academic, he travelled to Melbourne as chair of the independent committee established by the Victorian government, which led to the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities. As an aspiring candidate for federal preselection by Labor in New South Wales, he is also mooted as a future Attorney-General.

The purpose of a bill of rights is to restrain the lawmaking power of the state. Different bills of rights will seek to do this in different ways. In the United States, any law which is inconsistent with a right guaranteed under the Constitution (for example, the right to bear arms) should be struck down by the Supreme Court. Under the model used in Victoria, the Supreme Court is instead asked to interpret

laws in a way 'compatible' with specified rights. The Court is also given the power to make a non-binding declaration, intended to encourage the government to change the law, that a statute cannot be interpreted consistently with human rights.

Williams argues for the Commonwealth to follow the latter approach, a statutory bill of rights. Disappointingly, he does not consider the arguments against his position. This makes the book a missed opportunity, as the bill of rights issue raises difficult questions for both sides of the political divide.

First for critics on the Right, it should be observed that the aim of a bill of rights is to act as a fetter on government power. In a democracy, a bill of rights aims to protect individual rights from majoritarian rule. This is entirely consistent with classical liberal thought. Conservative

United States judges such as Antonin Scalia and Robert Bork are often cited by opponents of bills of rights. But a point that is often missed is that their concern relates to the interpretation of the US Bill of Rights, not its existence.

For supporters on the Left, it is worth reflecting that limits on government activities can be inconsistent with a number of traditional policy imperatives. Consider, for example, the United States Supreme Court, in the *Lochner* decision, which famously invalidated legislation providing for a maximum working week as inconsistent with the US Constitution. Similarly, note that the freedom of interstate

