

Is There A Diabetes Epidemic?

In recent years the prevailing wisdom both among **journalists** and among **experts** and **scientists** in the field has been that the incidence of diabetes has increased sharply and that there is currently an epidemic of the disease. Of course diabetes is not infectious, but the word 'epidemic' is **used**, by extension, to include any health-related events that are occurring at a significantly higher rate than before.

About a year ago, for instance, there was an epidemic of stories in the media claiming that a diabetes epidemic is in progress.

Now, further studies seem to show that this was based on a misinterpretation of data. The headline now is: **Diabetes epidemic fails to arrive:**

The prevalence of type 2 diabetes may have risen mainly because people are being picked up and treated earlier or are living longer

In other words, people are getting the disease at much the same rate as before, but there are more diabetics because they are being detected younger and living longer. The 'epidemic' was actually caused by a combination of two *good* developments!

That study was done in Denmark on 470,000 people. A **study in the US** (much smaller but perhaps more significant because it is the only study addressing this issue which has measured both diagnosed and undiagnosed diabetes) came to a similar conclusion:

The findings in this report indicate that the prevalence of diabetes, either diagnosed or undiagnosed, and impaired fasting glucose did not appear to increase substantially during the 1990s.

Yet we know (or at least, our best theories say) that (1) obesity is on the increase and (2) obesity does precipitate diabetes in a proportion of people. So there *should* have been an epidemic:

The apparent lack of increase in prevalence is unexpected in light of the increasing prevalence of obesity and overweight in U.S. adults documented by the NHANES surveys.

So there's something rather puzzling going on. What? We don't

know.

We just don't know. But research will continue and we will find out. And, probably, the answer will contain something else puzzling. This is the usual way in science. New knowledge takes us from puzzle to puzzle, never to a secure point from which we can speak authoritatively.

Sat, 09/06/2003 - 23:43 | [permalink](#)

Copyright © 2005 Setting The World To Rights