

RISMED 00180

Profile

Obesitas

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In an affluent society, the health problems posed by obesity are unavoidably of increasing importance. Research on their causes and treatment of the condition abounds; a great many forms of treatment are on offer, some based on various scientific approaches, other exploiting the thriving “slimming market” and have no basis in research; needless to say, many of these treatments are ineffective and some are harmful.

Scientists generally address the obese as an anonymous group in the population; physicians are often frustrated by the response to the treatments which they offer, and this may lead to disappointment in the patients or in themselves because of the high rates of failure and relapse. Some professionals, it must be added, treat the obese unethically, prescribing either placebos or forms of therapy having dangerous adverse effects.

Obesitas was founded in 1985 in Antwerp, Belgium [1], as a non-profit association to tackle such problems. It operates independently and impartially. It is managed by a Committee consisting largely of lay persons which constitutes the Board of Directors; this is supported by a Scientific Advisory Board of professionals, mostly from the academic community and representing the four pillars upon which the treatment of obesity rests: medicine, diet, psychology and exercise. The Association seeks to approach the problems of obesity in a multi-disciplinary manner and addresses its activities to both lay persons and professions, to children as well as adults.

Since 1985 Obesitas has organized biennial congresses on obesity at the University of Antwerp under the general title “Throw light on your weight”. Each has been attended by some 700–950 people for two days; at these meetings eminent speakers have discussed the problem of obesity with them; but they have also discussed it among themselves as a means of obtaining new information and drawing strength from meeting one another. The Congresses have, however, also proved of value to clinicians in learning more about how the obese experience their own physical, mental and social situation. The proceedings of all these congresses have been published.

Complementary to the Congresses are the Association’s publications, plans to establish a therapeutic centre in Flanders for the treatment of obesity, and a series

of winter lectures on particular problems of the obese and the rights and wrongs of individual forms of therapy, including exercise, sex therapy and behaviour methods.

During its initial years *Obesitas* was limited very largely to Flanders, with some participation from The Netherlands, but it became increasingly clear that there was demand for it to extend its activities internationally and to work more extensively in the English language. As result plans for an international meeting were developed. A number of existing congresses already do touch on the theme of obesity management, but there is none which directly seeks to provides assistance to field workers, nutritionists, dieticians, nurses or indeed obese persons themselves; and certainly there has so far been no international meeting centred entirely around obesity management.

For such reasons, *Obesitas* linked up with the World Health Organization's Regional Office for Europe to organize a International Congress on Obesity Management, with themes ranging from scientific approaches to the examination of individual experiences. The congress will be held on September 19th–22nd 1993, again in Antwerp, Belgium. Appropriately for a city which in 1993 is to play the role of cultural of Europe, Antwerp will provide the setting for what is designed as a truly international event. A number of major corporations and foundations have agreed to provide financial support.

During the initial preparations for the Congress it soon became clear that that is was impossible to determine who was concerned with obesity management in the various parts of Europe. With the aid of a grant from the Ministry of Health of the Flemish government, and intensive survey was therefore conducted to identify people working in one way or another with the problems of obesity, and particularly self-help or therapeutic groups across Europe. A questionnaire send to more than 8000 addresses and accompanying the first announcement is providing much further information on the current interest in the field. Among the many topics which prove to enjoy particularly wide interest are the safety and efficacy of treatments and its evaluation, the possibility of prevention, the psychological facets of obesity, the health risks and prognosis of the condition, obesity in children, education of the obese, obesity and sexuality.

Reference

- 1 Belgian Official Gazette (Belgisch Staatsblad), March 5th 1986;2713–2714.