

## LETTERS

## TACKLING OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY

# Inactivity, not gluttony, causes obesity

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Howard and Davies skirt over the main reasons for the rise in obesity, preferring to blame gluttony over sloth.<sup>1</sup> As the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs' national food survey and family food datasets show,<sup>2,3</sup> calorie intakes peaked in the 1970s, declined until the 2000s, and have flattened out since.

Their commentary contained just one small paragraph about the real cause: inactivity. If our calorie intake has fallen, then our tendency to burn off calories must have fallen faster.<sup>4</sup>

It's easier to blame food companies and restaurants than change urban environments so that walking and cycling are encouraged, but the Netherlands and Denmark (the countries with the fewest obese people in Europe) have the same restaurant chains and food habits as us. They have invested heavily and have great expertise in how to build infrastructure that discourages the use

of private cars and encourages active travel. Britain remains primitive in this respect.

Competing interests: I do a lot of utility cycling. I'm used to the UK's roads, but I am aware that many of my patients would never consider cycling because they are too intimidated.

- 1 Howard SJ, Davies SC. Chief medical officer urges action to tackle overweight and obesity. *BMJ* 2014;348:g2375. (27 March.)
- 2 Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs. National food survey. <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130103014432/http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/foodfarm/food/familyfood/nationalfoodsurvey/>.
- 3 Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs. Detailed annual statistics on family food and drink purchases. 2013. [www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/family-food-datasets](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/family-food-datasets).
- 4 Prentice AM, Jebb SA. Obesity in Britain: gluttony or sloth? *BMJ* 1995;311:437.

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