

Mark Masselli: This is Conversations on Health Care. I am Mark Masselli.

Margaret Flinter: And I am Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: Margaret, today we are going to talk about childhood obesity and have our listeners know that we work at the Community Health Center but few know that since 1972 we have been building a world class primary health care organization that's committed to special populations focusing on improving patient outcomes and building healthy communities. In addition to providing care we are also engaged in research and innovation and this year we are very focused on childhood obesity.

Margaret Flinter: You know, I think it's been almost 10 years since we did our first study at the health center on childhood obesity and when I look back we were lone voices in the world to some extent but it turns out people all over the country will be getting to recognize just what a problem we had on our hands and today, the whole country seems to be engaged in understanding it and working to prevent it. In fact, we were holding our annual symposium, our Weitzman Symposium in just a few weeks on June 10<sup>th</sup> and we are going to bring together people from around the country to look at innovations and policy and clinical practice and in community addressing the obesity epidemic because it's a complex problem and you just can't address it on one level.

Mark Masselli: And you know The Weitzman Center has been doing this for five years, bringing people in from all over the United States and around the world, to talk to us about innovations in health care, and this childhood obesity panel is going to be very exciting and robust. We have Dr. Ellen Rome from Cleveland Clinic who will come and present the work that they have been doing and certainly some of our own initiatives that we have developed at the health center.

Margaret Flinter: That's right and we are happy to say Dr. Rome will be joined by the Mayor of Somerville who is coming down with a team from Tufts. Also folks from the Rudd Center at Yale which has done such groundbreaking work in this area. But at the community level, we will be adding our own voices to that choir of people who have done work with \_\_\_\_\_ and community development projects working with young women and older women in the Community Health Centers.

Mark Masselli: And our guest today can add to this important discussion about childhood obesity and high performing health systems, Mildred Thompson is the Deputy Director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity and she is here today to help us understand the goals and challenges we face, we embark on their mission to occur childhood obesity. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has been committed to addressing the obesity epidemic for three years now and they have pretty ambitious goal to reverse it by

2015. We are happy Mildred can join us today to speak about this very important subject.

Margaret Flinter: And no matter what the story, you can hear all of our shows on our website Chcradio.com. Subscribe to iTunes to get our show regularly downloaded or if you want to hang on to our every word and read a transcript of one of our shows, come visit us at Chcradio.com.

Mark Masselli: And as always, if you have feedback, email us at Chcradio.com, we would love to hear from you. Before we speak with Mildred Thompson, let's check in with our producer Loren Bonner with the Headline News.

Loren Bonner: I am Loren Bonner with this week's Headline News. New findings reflect infant mortality has dropped around the world especially in several developing countries and improvements in care are linked to the good news. A new study in the journal The Lancet from researchers at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington found that the number of children younger than five who die this year will fall significantly. Christopher Murray is Director of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation and Senior Author of the study.

Christopher Murray: The number of children under age five around the world who are dying drops quite a bit. It's gone down from nearly 12 million deaths in 1990 to 7.7 million deaths today.

Loren Bonner: The improvement is being attributed to scaled-up efforts in recent years to combat things like malaria and mother to child transmission of HIV. Mickey Chopra, the Chief of Health at UNICEF, says the countries that have made the most progress in reducing child death rates are those where politicians have made children's programs a top priority.

Mickey Chopra: Spending more money but also in pushing community based primary care interventions foremost and preventive interventions as well such as vaccines and fluid and nutrition.

Loren Bonner: Chopra says that these simple but effective interventions show real progress even when economic growth and poverty levels around the world are not declining as fast. The data is less encouraging for the United States however. As the rest of the world makes strides reducing child mortality, the US is lagging behind. Today the US ranks 42<sup>nd</sup> globally, behind much of Europe as well as Cuba and Chile. Researchers found high child mortality rates not only among Latino and Black populations in the US, but also among higher income Whites, a group that traditionally has better access to medical care. Researchers also report substantially higher levels of preventable deaths from diseases like diabetes and pneumonia. Maternal mortality is also higher in the US than in most other industrialized countries. US deaths from obstetrical causes within

one year of giving birth rose 7.6 per 10,000 patients to 13.3 per 10,000 between 1996 and 2006. The reasons why are still unclear. Some attributed to the changes and how statistics are now calculated. Other suspects are medical approach hasn't adapted to the shifting profile of the American mother, a woman who today is more likely to be over 30 and obese. Others blame the high number of cesarean sections which account for 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of all births to these alarming statistics.

This week Conversations on Health Care focuses on the issue of childhood obesity. Everyone from individuals to government and business realize that they have a part to play to help solve this crisis. IBM is the latest to come forth. The company is hoping to use its powerful data capabilities to give decision maker support for identifying the most significant factors influencing obesity. IBM says it will start utilizing computer models to analyze available data on known factors. Things such as consumer behavior the location of grocery stores and fitness facilities and even community transportation options to determine how these factors interact and therefore what policy is best suited for a particular situation. Since IBM has the technological capability the company says they see this as an opportunity to work with different groups who have the data so that they can help everyone from doctors to politicians make scientific decisions about childhood obesity. It's an effort to understand and to quantify how every piece of our environment can contribute to obesity because the problem is more complicated than trying to push health food and more exercise onto people. Certainly this connection between obesity and processed foods or lack of exercise is widely acknowledged but in many cases it's a guessing game as to whether a bigger impact would be made to incentivizing a new health food retailer to move into town or expanding bus routes in areas with higher concentration of dual income families. The advanced simulations of such factors and systems IBM is working on could help predict which programs to curb obesity would be most successful and where. Paul Maglio, an IBM researcher says lots of different organizations already have models or ways of understanding different pieces of what is a very complex system. IBM is unique and that it can bring all of those systems together for the first time.

Mark Masselli: Our hope for the future is to be able to make planning decisions, investment decisions based on an understanding of how the complex world actually works and how the interactions of systems in that complex world actually works as opposed to just thinking about those systems in isolation.

Margaret Flinter: IBM intends to partner with a range of individuals and organizations on the project down the line from industry leaders to medical clinicians by the end of this year. Its goal is to have one working model around obesity and over the next few years IBM intends to create a replicable platform so that decision makers can plug in their own models and make predications about what policies around childhood obesity will work most effectively. Let's turn now to our interview with Mildred Thompson from the Robert Wood Johnson

Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity to discuss why the foundation has made reversing childhood obesity its top priority and the ways in which it's been committed to the challenge.

Mark Masselli: This is Conversations on Health Care. Today we are speaking with Mildred Thompson, Deputy Director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity, welcome Mildred. You know the Obama administration has a strong plan in place to fight childhood obesity through the First Ladies Let's Move campaign and your foundation was involved in the report solving the problem of childhood obesity within a generation put out by the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity. Let's do the 70 recommendations aligned with the foundation's own policies and principles, but one point where they differ is that your goal to reverse the epidemic comes 15 years sooner than the White House in 2015. What's the basis for your more aggressive goals and do you see some cause for optimizing in any of your early results?

Mildred Thompson: There isn't a major distinction. I think that we are all wanting to see the health of our nation's children improve. It's just the measures that we are using have some of them require a longer period of time but Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is aggressive in trying to address this issue because really they believe that everyday that passes means that our children are at risk for a range of illnesses that some of which can be prevented, if we were to change some of the environmental factors. So the sooner we can increase awareness about the problems the sooner we can begin to improve the environment so that parents and families can make better choices because they have better choices available to them. And the optimism that I see is that this issue has never had a more broader range of awareness in input and so at the highest level we have an issue that we care of about and now it's being embraced also by the administration. At the same time there are stakes across the country that's taken on this issue at a local level, at a regional level and at a statewide level so there is nothing like having a range of people speaking your same message about not only the message about something needs to be done but that we need to do it but looking at the environment and the place they focus. So to have that kind of broad awareness about an issue is really the best way for us to kind of have the impact that we are looking.

Margaret Flinter: And Mildred well before we heard about the administration's efforts this year, the foundation has been committed to addressing the obesity epidemic, remembering back to the announcement in April 2007 that you would invest at least \$500 million over a five-year period to reverse the epidemic, and certainly we have respected the foundation President Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey's commitment to making this a top priority. So you have funded such a wide variety of initiatives and there is no simple answers to complex problems we know that, but any one or two initiatives that things or promise of being a real game changers, things that really seem to make a difference.

Mildred Thompson: Well, I think there are several things. #1 is the foundation has funded leading researchers who is really making the case, who is showing the evidence that this isn't just an emotional factor. We are not trying to address obesity to have a cosmetics for people to look better. It is about addressing the implications of health and when you have the evidence that supports why these changes need to be in place that's really also critical but the foundation has funded about 18 organizations under the umbrella of this obesity center that's doing a range of work around actions and advocacy and research that combined we need all of that. We have got to have the research to support and build the evidence. At the same time we have got to be excellent on the ground to change those local policies and there is got to be a communication. So the other piece that I would congratulate them about is this communication fees. This awareness of shedding a light on why African American, Latino children face the kind of risk associated with overweight and obesity at a much greater proportion than other children. So we can't allow this epidemic to continue and I think I wouldn't want to highlight one particular program because we need all of them. We need the research, we need to excel on the ground and we got to have the environmental change and this includes awareness and to communicate our message to broad audiences.

Margaret Flinter: And research certainly takes time if it's done well and I am guessing then that we don't have any of the results of the formal research projects in yet. Would that be a fair statement?

Mildred Thompson: Well there is some research that's in, that there is a research that several organizations are doing research that's really cutting edge, there is Bridging the Gap is the group that's been funded by the foundation to do research. The Yale Rudd Center is doing some amazing research around sugar-sweetened beverages and how it's impacting the health of our children.

Mark Masselli: You know you have a great background for the job that you hold. You were the director of the City of Oakland's Healthy Start program and had your own training in early childhood development, so you have a great grasp on the importance of promoting and applying healthy practices for pregnant moms and developing children and the White House report devotes that entire first section to the significance of giving children a healthy start, things like promoting prenatal counseling and breastfeeding, prioritizing research and factors that lead to obesity. Can you explain why these initiatives in gestation and early childhood are so crucial for the obesity prevention effort?

Mildred Thompson: You can't begin earlier so people believe that when a woman is pregnant that's the opportunity but really I believe that it's before she gets pregnant because if she enters pregnancy in a compromised state of health than she is going to have a slightly harder time with this pregnancy according to the data that we are aware of. So it's important that a woman is healthy when she

enters the state of pregnancy. And so what we are trying to shed a light on is that in order for her to be healthy to deliver a healthy baby the community has got to support her in being healthy, that means there has got to be grocery stores that give her the range of healthy food, there has got to be exercise, there has got to be an emphasis on health and health promotion. Yes, there are some communities who have been able to get money to fund to Healthy Start Programs in their different areas and all of those efforts need to be in place because you are using federal funds, you are having local public health departments involved, you are having state health departments involved, and really it requires a broad sector and engagement to have the kind of changes that we are looking for.

Margaret Flinter: Mildred, we can't talk about children of course without talking about the role of schools in children's health. Recently we spoke with Colorado Governor Bill Ritter who has a distinction of being governor of the leanest state in the country but he made the point that they are very concerned there about the \_\_\_\_\_ and that schools really represent an underutilized element of infrastructure in this work on obesity. Certainly many of your initiatives have had a focus on the schools, what evidence do you see that change in policy in schools to promote better nutrition and physical activity can be an effective strategy and does that benefit extend to other family members in addition to just the children?

Mildred Thompson: Oh absolutely, absolutely. The school environment, it's one area that we are focusing on because that's the place where children spend a large majority of their time, not only when you factor in also the after school environment. So we have to have healthy environment and that includes everything from looking at the food that's available in the schools and changing some of those school food choices. And at least taking the vending machines and sodas out of school and having healthy water available, getting the water fountain in place. That also means having physical activity available, having a requirement and a mandate for play for younger children at recess and play as well as, some unstructured as well as structured physical activity and using nontraditional, using dance and other forms of physical activity that's going to appeal to a range of children in their ethnic diversity. It also means making sure that the schools have the kind of resources that they need to improve the school environment and to make sure that schools understand that there is a link between having healthy children and having high performing students.

Mark Masselli: Today we are speaking with Mildred Thompson, Deputy Director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity. Another important area and effort is the initiative to give residents and low-income neighborhoods more access to healthier food, it's a real challenge though because many grocery stores don't want to invest in the poor neighborhoods, maybe don't have the financial backing to put up grocery stores. Are there any

incentives for law makers to push more health food financing, is the foundation working in this area as well?

Mildred Thompson: Yes, the foundation has been among a group of partners who have been heavily investing in getting grocery stores in low-income communities through efforts such as the Fresh Food Financing Initiative, that was a model that existed in Philadelphia which showed that having these healthy foods available in grocery stores, you know resulted in a variety of different benefits. It wasn't just the health, it was also the economic benefit. It was around community development in getting jobs in place. And what we are really excited about is that the Obama administration is trying to take that model and bring it up to scale to have a national Fresh Food Financing Initiative in place and several states have embraced that. So grocery store is just one example. Every place isn't going to have a grocery store. There are also incentives to have the local corner stores serve healthier produce and having incentives to support those business people to have the kind of refrigeration that's needed. There are also efforts around having Farmers Markets be more available and having them accept WIC Coupons and the Food Stamp Coupons, so we have got to change a range of Food Retail Environment to improve health.

Margaret Flinter: Mildred that's very interesting and really focuses on going down the positive road of making better food choices available to people. I think one of the changes we have seen in this effort is that which is not so much anymore about blaming the victim, blaming the person who is overweight or obese but really looking at root causes and it seems to me that there is more of a national dialogue beginning now on some of those root causes that maybe haven't been so public, the things that the researchers now call obesogens, chemicals that may disrupt how we metabolize food and may contribute to it. And we have seen a new collaboration between some of the corporations that produce the snacks and the sugary drinks that people have implicated. Is your center involved in those discussions with the industry that produces some of the foods that we have been trying to move people away from and how is that initiative going?

Mildred Thompson: Well there is one of these things that we are doing is that we are trying to figure out how to really effectively engage the business community more effectively into this conversation, so that and the obesity center has created a series of webinars that we have been doing to highlight these issues in one of the webinars that will take place on June 9<sup>th</sup>, will be involving this group that now being forms to Healthy Weight Commitment that's a group of industry to hear from them on the kind of strategies that they must undertake in order to change the environment. So we have to make the case so that it's a win-win situation. Yes, we want to engage them, yes, we want to hold them accountable, but we want to see them do some of this voluntarily that in order for them to be really good neighbors and business partners they have got to make it quite a fair business case to improve the nutritional value of their foods, and to really listen to the evidence and it happens to determine how they should make some

changes happen. So, yes we are engaging with them, we are trying to reach out a hand and to be supportive but we are also going to push them when we need to push.

Mark Masselli: Thinking about pushing people and new ideas, we would like to ask all of our guest what innovations in health care do you see going around the country with a world that excite you in? What should our listeners at Conversations be keeping an eye out on?

Mildred Thompson: The preventive conversation because if we can provide some of these diseases and illnesses that we don't have to pay so much down the road. That's the one message that I want to begin to address is that we have got to pay attention to the particular disparities that exist among the communities of color in this communities that we live in and we have got to begin to take a look at the region, how a southern region can have some of the worst health outcome. So there is all of these things that we need to do to prevent some of the roads that we are going down.

Margaret Flinter: We have been speaking with Mildred Thompson, Deputy Director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Center to Prevent Childhood Obesity. Mildred, thank you so much for joining us today.

Mark Masselli: Each week, Conversations highlights a bright idea about how to make wellness a part of our communities into everyday lives.

Margaret Flinter: In past weeks we have brought you stories on medical applications for cell phones and video simulations for health care providers. This week's bright idea focuses on a new use of mobile health technology. Using text messages to increase new mothers access to pertinent information, about having a healthy pregnancy and raising a healthy child. The text for baby campaign was launched by the White House in February and with the support of many partners the program has already served over 36,000 expected mothers, and passed on over a million text messages. Expect a mother, sign-up for these three weekly text messages time to their due date. By receiving the messages several times a week the program helps women remember to make crucial appointments, to take certain safety precautions, such as wearing a seatbelt. These texts also convey important news such as problems with pediatric medications. Text for baby also makes a difference in the long run by helping mothers know what is normal and what is cause for concern during different stages of pregnancy or early childhood development. Mothers can receive information on specific topics whenever they want by texting the word BABY to the number 511411. And text for baby has a Spanish language version in which the users text BEBE. The program has many enthusiasts who started outreach coalitions to spread the word. One such coalition in Philadelphia celebrated Easter earlier this month and its diverse members include the Philadelphia Health Commission, the Maternity Care Coalition and Clear Channel Radio. Texts for baby's creators have high hopes



for its continued growth and success. Over 90% of adult Americans carry cell phones so this program reaches busy mothers right where they are, helping them and soon their babies to lead healthier lives one text at a time. Now that's a bright idea.

Margaret Flinter: This is Conversations on Health Care. I am Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: And I am Mark Masselli, peace and health.

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