

Teesdale u3a Monthly Meeting – July 2025

The obesity crisis - are weight loss drugs the answer?

This was the title of Ruth Lapworth's very topical talk to the July u3a meeting.

Adults are generally considered obese if they have a body mass of 30 or more, the body mass index (BMI) being weight in kilograms divided by height in metres squared. Recently, waist measurement has been added to reflect the growth in type 2 diabetes and other health problems. A large-scale international survey from 1990 to 2022 shows that there has been a significant shift towards increased obesity and that people are becoming obese at a younger age. The United States has the highest obesity rate at 43%, with the UK at 28%, the highest in Europe. Countries in SE Asia have the lowest rates, particularly Japan. It is estimated that by 2050, 50% of adults world-wide will be either overweight or obese. In the UK 2/3rds of over 35s are currently either overweight or obese with the highest rate in Country Durham.

Environmental causes of obesity are a complex mix of inactivity, appetite regulation, eating too much processed food and poor-quality sleep. The costs to individuals and to society are enormous eg, £6.5 billion to the NHS in 2024. Other costs include loss of productivity due to poor health, investment in hospital equipment such as beds and wheelchairs and larger seats in aircraft and sports stadia.

Many cases of obesity are associated with an increase in type 2 diabetes (a disorder of glucose regulation). The discovery of gut hormones such as GLP-1 and GIP which provoke insulin release led to the development of the drug semaglutide (Ozempic) to treat type 2 diabetes. The significant weight loss seen in patients treated with Ozempic led to its reformulation as Wegovy to manage weight loss. Another drug, Mounjaro, mimics the actions of both GLP-1 and GIP is now available. Both Wegovy and Mounjaro suppress appetite and promote feelings of fullness leading to lower food intake and weight loss. As with most drugs, there can be side effects including nausea, diarrhoea and pancreatitis. The global supply of these drugs and their cost is an issue. There are also concerns around eligibility, their availability on-line and their long-term use. It is likely that further research of other medical conditions.

In an excellent presentation, Ruth was able to make a complicated subject accessible to an appreciative audience. The next meeting will be held on Thursday 28th August when Jane Harrison will be speaking on Peru-Inca and Pre-Hispanic Cultures.

Ian Reid