

Dieting Since The 1850s

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Jacqueline Henson, 40, from Huddersfield, England, died due to an overdose of water in December 2008 when she started a meal replacement diet plan called LighterLife. The autopsy revealed that she died from brain swelling. The LighterLife diet plan aims to help people reduce their weight by restricting their consumption to 500 calories a day for 12 weeks.¹ Such an extreme regime might otherwise be indicative of a greater psychological problem, but LighterLife is sold as a product and billed as a diet. Ms. Henson's story prompts the question, "What does it truly mean to be on a diet?" Does it mean eliminating indulgences, increasing healthy foods or not eating at all? Dieting today is generally prompted by one of the two things: you want to lose weight, or you are suffering from a condition such as diabetes which requires you to be on a regulated diet. The Oxford Dictionary defines the diet as "prescribed course of food, restricted in kind or limited in quantity, esp. for medical or penal reasons; regimen."

Today, however, few diets seem to have only a medical rationale. With so many Americans dieting for non-medical reasons, it seems our concept of 'diet' has changed. This paper explores the history of dieting in today's world and its social, economic, and political implications. The weight loss industry makes use of the increasingly predominant desire to be 'skinny' and plays on the misconception that being skinny is being healthy. The issue of dieting is a multifaceted idea that inextricably links government control, business, ethics, and society with health.

Ironically today, both the rate of obesity and the rate of dieting are increasing. One of the strongest driving forces behind this contradictory trend is the billion dollar weight loss industry. People pay large sums of money for diet pills, remedies, and books, with the hope of losing weight permanently. This has not had much of an effect on the obesity rates of this country. Weight loss surgeries accounted for \$3.5 billion in 2004 and the 'low-carb diet', eating fewer carbohydrates, became a long-term investment rather than a short-term fad.² We have also heard of regimens such as the Atkins diet, the South Beach diet and the Cabbage diet, among others.

Dieting is commonly thought to have evolved around the mid-nineteenth century, during the industrial revolution in America. Keith Waiden and T. J. Jackson Lears are strong proponents of the belief that industrialization, and not socio-economic conditions, helped spur the increase in dieting. Hillel Schwartz echoed these sentiments, suggesting that "each epoch has had different tolerances for weight and for fatness, since the 1880s, those tolerances have grown especially narrow."³ Other historians offer interesting opinions on the need for diets. Vester argues that diets were introduced as a male-centric concept that related smaller waistlines to power and social privileges. Others such as Naomi Woolf contradict



"Personenwaage", courtesy of Frank C. Muller via WikiCommons

Vester, suggesting that dieting was an integral part of the concept of 'American femininity.'⁴ Central to all of theories is the fact that diets have played an important part in society, especially in the lives of women, for several decades.

The increase in dieting can also be seen as the product of the increased need (perceived or otherwise) for women to focus on their body image. Being slim is not only favourable but is also considered to be healthier. It has been scientifically proven that being overweight or obese carries increased health risks, particularly related to cardiac conditions. This medical fact, along with the rise in obesity, has exacerbated the need to remain slim. Curiously enough, weight gain (i.e. the opposite of dieting) was favored until after World War I. However, by the 1920s 'fat' became associated with immigrants and the lower class, while being thin was associated with the white middle and upper class. The anxiety around body image and weight loss began in the 1920s and has remained strong until today.⁵

Apart from the medical awareness of the risks of obesity, the media has helped greatly to perpetuate the 'skinny' image. Celebrities, male and female, rely on their 'hot' skinny bodies to promote their image. While excess fat is proven to be unhealthy, moderate to low amounts of it are not at all harmful. But the prevalent belief relates being thin to being attractive, not to being healthy. A survey conducted by the Nutrisystem Diet Index revealed that 66% of Americans believed they need to lose weight, with the average desired weight loss equaling 23 pounds. Additionally, the survey also revealed that close to 33% of Americans surveyed felt conscious of their body, especially in the height of the swim season where body shape is more visible.⁶

The main stakeholder benefiting from the skinny trend is the weight loss industry itself. While the weight loss industry

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is a billion dollar industry today, it did not even exist 80 years ago. This industry has grown tremendously through the marketing of diverse products including lotions, pills, CDs, diet plans, diet counsellors, and pervading American minds through advertisements placed on television, radio, newspapers and the internet. An estimate of \$33 billion to \$55 billion is spent annually on such products, and 6-12% of this is spent by weight loss centres.⁷

The clientele of this industry are mainly young adults and the working population. This population has little time to structure their own health routine, and have a relatively larger disposable income, making them the ideal consumers for convenient fitness regimes. The weight loss industry in the US has yet to tap into the aging population. America faces the issue of a large aging population, (the population 65 years old or older) which is increasing more rapidly than the number of people below 18. This population shift is found in many developed countries due to low birth rates and high average life expectancy. The aging population of the US is 12.5%, (1 in every 8 Americans) and this provides massive scope for growth for the weight loss industry.⁸ Currently, only 20% of America's health club members are over 55, yet that is a 320% increase within the last 20 years.⁹ The industry has employed only a fraction of the aging population, and its popularity, health and fitness will go a long way with those over 65 years of age.

The social influences of obesity and body image have helped the weight loss industry gain tremendous momentum. The government too has been sufficiently alarmed by the obesity epidemic, and has intervened in consumer's food choices for years. Evidence of this is seen in the form of government interventions. For example, in 1941, the Food and Nutrition Board of the US Academy of Sciences released Recommended Dietary Allowances (RDAs) and Daily Values (DVs) that recommended food and portion choices to the American public. In the 1990s, the US government encouraged the consumption of low-fat and no-fat food products. Annemarie Jutel, in her article 'Does Size Really Matter', argues that the US National Institutes of Health places greater importance on weight management than on health management.¹⁰ Jutel also suggests that the government report encourages the 'medical gaze' of the physician on the patient to revolve around physical examinations of measurement such as height and weight, rather than a more comprehensive history of the patient's lifestyle.

Despite the US government's interference with the food and medical industries, it has failed to interfere appropriately in the weight loss industry. Begley, at the University of Texas Health Science Center, makes the case that the "weight loss industry is developed on the basis of the concepts of market failure and potential harm to consumers." Begley asserts that the industry takes advantage of the inadequate knowledge of

the consumers on issues of weight loss and health, and consequently, cannot judge the quality of products and services employed. Begley calls for more restrictions on this industry because it can cause irreparable damage to the consumers, as seen in Jacqueline Henson's case.¹¹

Despite the high demand for weight loss in the US, there has been little criticism of it. In Jacqueline Henson's case, a verdict of it being an 'accidental case' was recorded and LighterLife was not acquitted on any grounds. In fact, the coroner suggested that LighterLife had given precise directions of how much water to drink but Henson failed to follow the guidelines correctly.¹² This case inevitably raises several questions of how medically sound such acclaimed diet plans

are, and of the potential health risks. In addition, it also raises the question of how much risk one is willing to take in order to achieve the perfect body, which is very much desired in today's society.

While dieting is increasingly visible, few experts such as Jutel and Begley, seem to emphasize the fact that dieting is a large part of American culture today. With modest beginnings in the 1920s, the prevalence of dieting has resulted in a widespread discourse on food, health, and the weight loss industry. However, this trend of dieting has created several implications. The weight loss industry exerts a great influence in the health and well-being of their consumers. With dieting and food control

embedded in society, its repercussions need to be evaluated carefully, and body image and health, and the relationship between the two, need to be revisited.

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