Opening remarks

The Olympics are upon us, and the Olympic flame fills us with a certain sense of pride and inspiration as we watch these young men and women give their all as they compete. But what you do not see are the hours and hours of training and the care with which these young athletes address the other parts of their lives. The way they eat and exercise and live their lives is certainly in keeping with their outstanding performance in the games. They are mindful of what they eat and of how much they sleep and they are certainly careful not to jeopardize their performance by overindulgence, at least not too often.

This conference is turning its attention away from the Olympic athlete and is focusing on a more typical American, one who is living, or is interested in living, a physically active life and is interested in maximizing personal performance. I count myself among that group.

For us, like the Olympic athlete, the ingredients of successful performance have as much to do with the way we live our lives, the way we eat, the discipline we apply to the amount and type of exercise we get, and the extent to which we control our weight. These are issues that we and the Olympic athlete confront in like fashion.

I consider these important issues to be so integrated with one another that in 1994, I founded an organization called Shape Up America! Shape Up America! was born out of a realization that this country is indulging in an epidemic of obesity. More than 58 million American adults are obese, which is especially troubling because it goes right across the board to include children. Shape Up America! is dedicated to tackling the physical inactivity and poor dietary habits that so many Americans have adopted and that are the cause of this obesity epidemic.

In 1993, Mike McGuinus and Bill Foege published a study in the Journal of the American Medical Association on the actual causes of death in the United States. They concluded that the number 2 preventable cause of death in America is poor dietary and activity habits. The death toll was calculated to be 3300000 preventable or “premature” deaths/y. Obesity will not appear on any of those death certificates. Instead, the cause of death will be attributed to diabetes, heart disease, stroke, hypertension, or some types of cancer.

In 1995 Shape Up America! conducted a national telephone survey of adult Americans living in cities across the country. We found that persons earning $25000/y watch television for between 2 and 2.5 h/d. A third of those persons watch television for 33 h/d. As income decreased, even more television watching was reported, especially among overweight persons. Among adults earning <$15000/y, average daily television watching was 3.1 h in nonoverweight persons and 4.3 h in those who were overweight.

As discouraging as these figures may be and as dedicated to sedentary lifestyles and dietary indiscretions as Americans are, we believe that we can and must encourage change. Those of us well understand that obesity and inactivity are linked to chronic diseases that are both disabling and killing Americans. According to a recent report, we also know that treating these diseases is costing us $100 billion/y and we know that this figure is >5 times the entire budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

As you participate in this conference and consider the personal needs of physically active people, I hope you will keep in mind the fact that ever-greater proportions of ordinary Americans are choosing to remain physically inactive. We are well aware that there are complex social, cultural, and economic factors that have to be addressed if we are ever going to turn this unfortunate situation around. I hope you will be mindful of these concerns and will join us in encouraging more Americans to adopt active lifestyles and appropriate nutritional strategies to support physical activity. Surely, we all have a vested interest in attaining this goal.

In closing, I wish you all the very best as you identify the areas in which increasingly scarce federal research dollars should be invested. I think it is appropriate to ask the hard questions about how much and where money is invested by the NIH in the area of nutrition. The $400 million spent annually on nutrition research by the NIH is dwarfed by the $67 billion annual cost of chronic diseases and disability linked to poor nutrition and inactivity.

It is also appropriate, I believe, to identify the areas in which private sector research can step into the ever-widening breach as federal research budgets are increasingly strained. Certainly, we need innovative research partnerships with the private sector that will fund high-quality, competitively awarded research proposals that result in studies published in respected peer-reviewed journals.

By all means, we should be congratulated for being here and for addressing an issue that is relevant to the health and the well-being of Americans. Nutrition research provides public benefits in areas relevant to the goals of this conference. It provides us with the solid science-based answers we need to guide our efforts to promote the achievement of personal and public health, but it also makes the marketplace less fertile for those who would profit from nutritional quackery. So I applaud efforts such as this to shed light on how our scarce research dollars can be invested wisely.

I would like to thank Dr Marriott and the Office of Dietary Supplements for inviting me to share my thoughts with you this morning. I wish you well as you embark on this very important journey.

C Everett Koop