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HEALTHY LIVING

Battling the teen bulge

BY SIMONE JOSEPH
Staff Writer

Johnny wakes up at 7:40, eats his sugar-coated Cocoa Puffs, hops into his used car and heads to high school 20 minutes away — too far to bike or walk to.

He heads to English class, followed by French. At 11:40 a.m., he grabs a large carton of fries smothered with gravy, a burger topped with all the fixings and a can of pop from the vending machine.

After sitting through two more classes he drives to his job at Bob's Tunes. His main motivation for working there is spending money and to get a major discount on CDs. The store is right next to the mall's food court.

During his dinner break, he grabs combo #2 — chicken balls dripping with sweet-and-sour sauce, an egg roll, fried rice and a pop, all for \$5.99.

'They need a lot of opportunities for different activity. They need fun, a break in their day. If they are physically active, they can learn better.'

Johnny is a fictional character, but he represents the type of lifestyle and lack of activity that makes many teenagers unhealthy, inactive and overweight, according to Sharon Delurey Baker, public health nurse with York Region Health Services.

Like Johnny, real-life teenagers spend much of their day in class, studying at home or working at jobs that often provide access to high-fat foods, says Mrs. Delurey Baker, who visits schools to encourage physical activity.

"The curriculum is heavy, (teenagers) are sitting a lot without any policy around that (exercise)," she says.

Between Grades 9 and 13, the Ontario Ministry of Education only requires students take one physical education credit.

Mrs. Delurey Baker believes exercise should not be optional but integrated into every teenager's school day.

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A study published in The New England Journal of Medicine in September looked at activity levels in adolescent girls in the United States. It said when girls reach their teens, they 'exercise' less. The cause of this

drop is not known, according to the study.

Inactivity can lead to obesity, which is a major problem in Canada, according to Health Minister Anne McLellan.

This week, the federal government announced it would spend \$15 million to study obesity in Canadians.

"Estimates suggest close to half of adult Canadians are overweight and that one in six is obese," Ms McLellan said Tuesday.

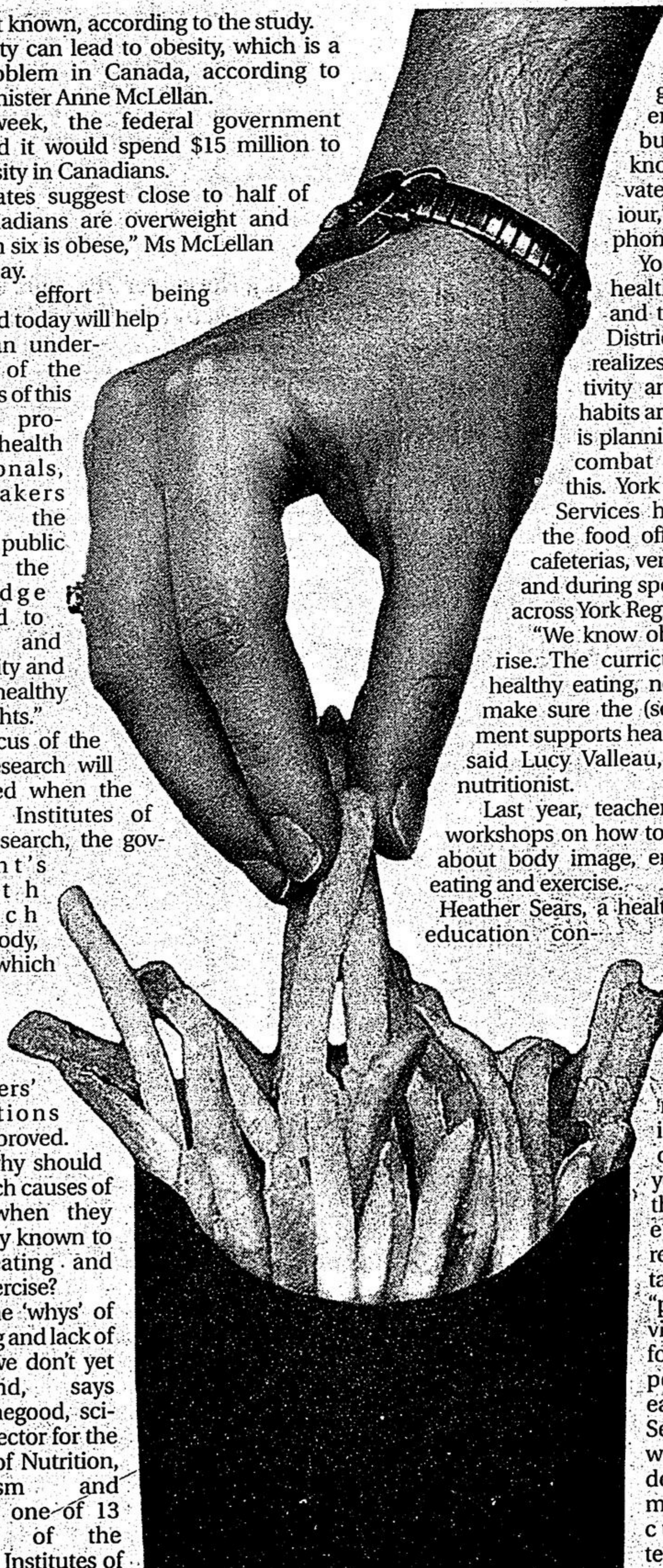
"The effort being announced today will help develop an understanding of the root causes of this epidemic, providing health professionals, policymakers and the Canadian public with the knowledge they need to prevent and treat obesity and maintain healthy body weights."

The focus of the obesity research will be decided when the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, the government's health research funding body, chooses which

researchers' applications will be approved.

But why should we research causes of obesity when they are already known to be overeating and lack of exercise?

It is the 'whys' of overeating and lack of exercise we don't yet understand, says Diane Finegood, scientific director for the Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism and Diabetes, one of 13 institutes of the Canadian Institutes of



Health Research.

"We know girls don't have enough activity but we don't know what motivates their behaviour," she said in a phone interview.

York Region's health department and the York Region District School Board realizes obesity, inactivity and poor eating habits are problems and is planning programs to combat and prevent this. York Region Health Services hopes to study the food offered in school cafeterias, vending machines and during special event days across York Region.

"We know obesity is on the rise. The curriculum supports healthy eating, now we want to make sure the (school) environment supports healthy eating too," said Lucy Valteau, public health nutritionist.

Last year, teachers were offered workshops on how to teach students about body image, enjoying healthy eating and exercise.

Heather Sears, a health and physical education con-

sultant for the public board believes exercise and healthy eating need to be ingrained in children at a young age. While the ministry of education requires elementary students, to "participate in vigorous activity for a sustained period of time each day", Ms Sears believes with the demands of the ministry's new curriculum, teachers are hav-

ing a difficult time putting this into practise.

She hopes, however, several new programs will help physical activity become a reality in the classroom. One such program, completed in March and scheduled to be introduced this school year, is a series of units developed by the ministry to integrate exercise into academic subjects for example, merging physical activity into the Grade 1 literacy curriculum.

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An on-line physical education resource planned for teachers and written by health educators in York Region will provide teachers with one activity for every day of the school year.

But Ms Sears believes more needs to be done for youth, especially girls. Teens should have to take one physical education course each year and inactive girls should be asked why they don't exercise and which activities in which they would like to engage, she says.

"We can speculate all we want, but there needs to be discussions with girls."

For information on Health Canada's Physical Activity Guide, call 1-888-334-9769 or go to Canada's Physical

OBESITY FACTS

If a child's parents are both obese, there is an 80-per cent likelihood the child will become obese. This is due to a combination of genetic and lifestyle factors.

The estimated cost of obesity in Canada in 1997 was more than \$1.8 billion, about 2.4 per cent of the total health-care budget.

More girls than boys between the ages of 12 and 19 were physically active in the 2000-2001 year. Sixty-four per cent of girls were deemed physically active compared to 42 per cent of boys.

Overweight children and adolescents are at a substantially increased risk for developing several cardiovascular disease risk factors, such as elevated blood cholesterol levels and high blood pressure, as well as other health problems.

Sources: National Institute of Nutrition, Canadian Medical Association Journal, Statistics Canada and York Region Health Services' School Health Connection: A Newsletter for Elementary School Teachers Volume 2, Issue 6 February 2002.



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