# How Bias Harms People and Blocks Progress Against Obesity

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# Disclosures

- Professional fees
  - Novo Nordisk
  - Nutrisystem
- Personal biases that favor:
  - Evidence-based interventions, both prevention and treatment
  - Respect for people living with obesity
  - Critical thinking about all evidence

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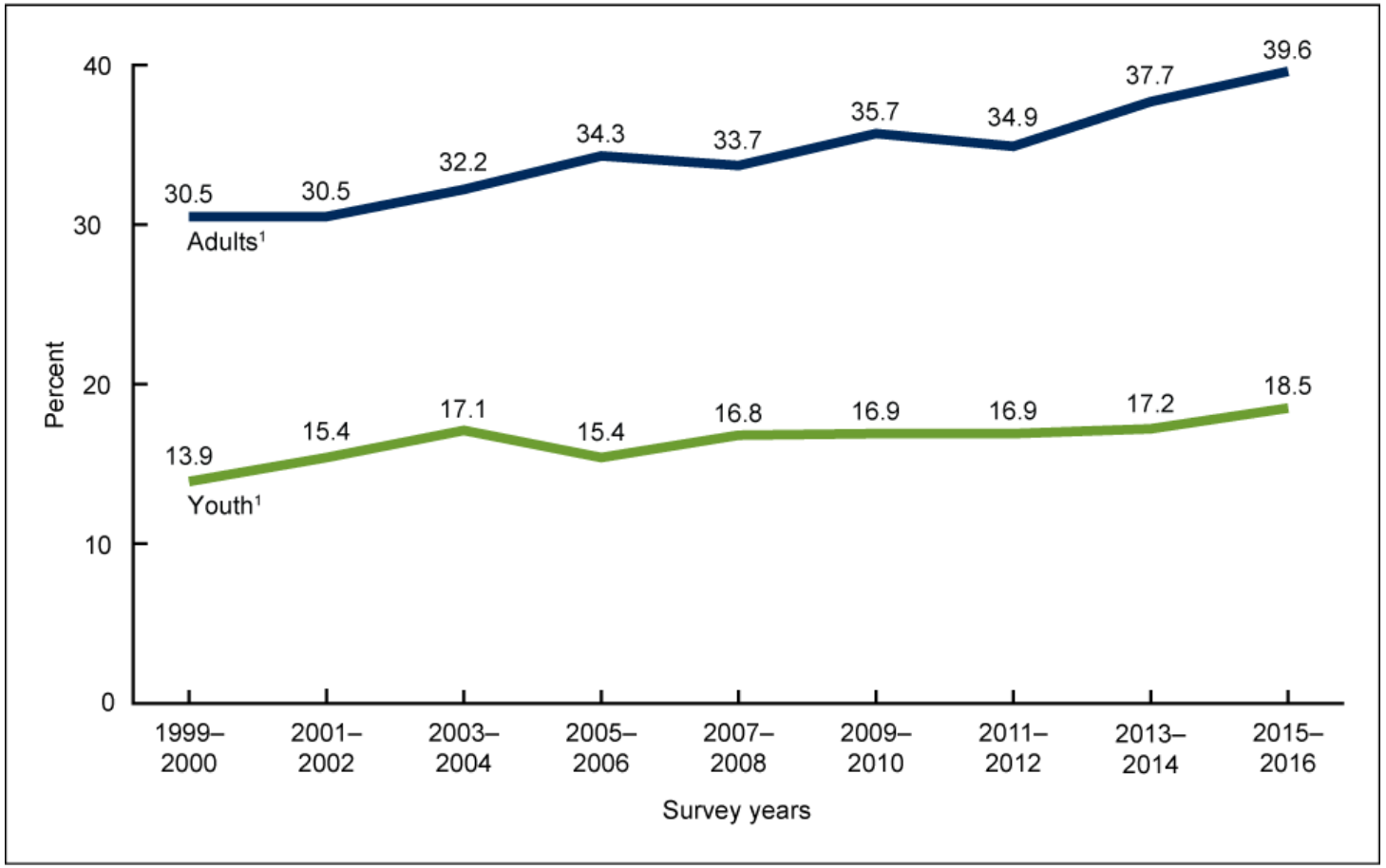
# Presentation Objectives

- Describe how bias harms millions of people living with obesity
- Explore ways it blocks our progress
- Discuss ways to close the gap between what we know and do

*Source: Pawel Loj / flickr*

# Why Is It That Obesity Trends Have Not Turned Around?

Figure 5. Trends in obesity prevalence among adults aged 20 and over (age adjusted) and youth aged 2–19 years: United States, 1999–2000 through 2015–2016




[1]Significant increasing linear trend from 1999–2000 through 2015–2016.
NOTES: All estimates for adults are age adjusted by the direct method to the 2000 U.S. census population using the age groups 20–39, 40–59, and 60 and over.
Access data table for Figure 5 at: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db288_table.pdf#5.
SOURCE: NCHS, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, 1999–2016.

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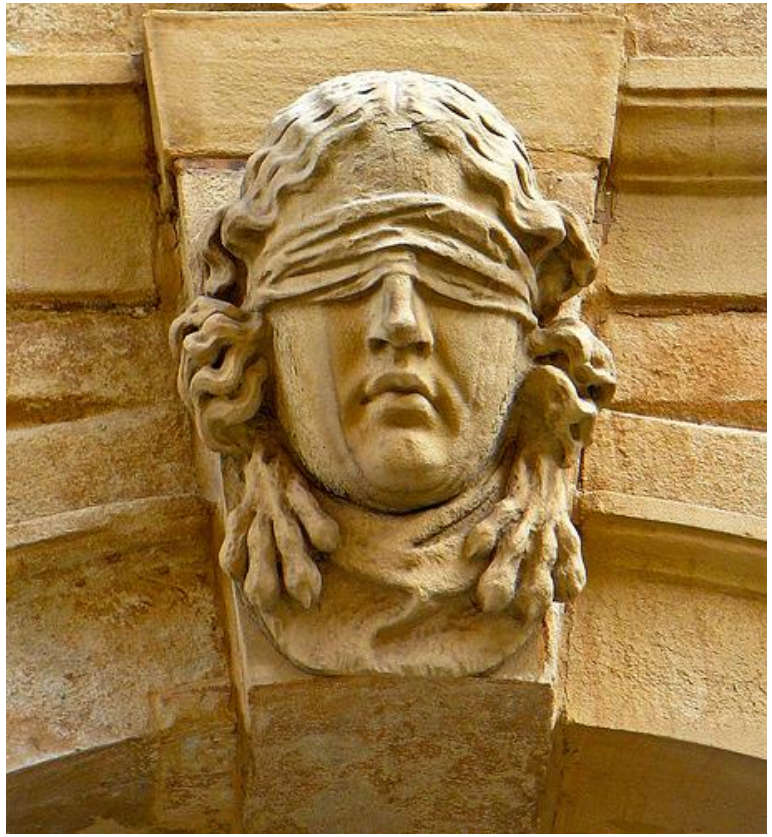
After Three Decades of Hard Work, Why Does Obesity Keep Growing?

# Bottom Line: Bias Is the Biggest Reason

# Bias Comes from Selective Blindness to Facts

Bias is an inclination or outlook to present or hold a **partial perspective**, often accompanied by a **refusal to consider** the possible merits of **alternative points of view**. Biases are learned implicitly within cultural contexts. People may develop biases toward or **against** an **individual**, an ethnic **group**, a nation, a religion, a social class, a political party, theoretical **paradigms** and **ideologies** within academic domains, or a species.

– Adapted from
*Psychology: Contemporary Perspectives*
Paul Okami

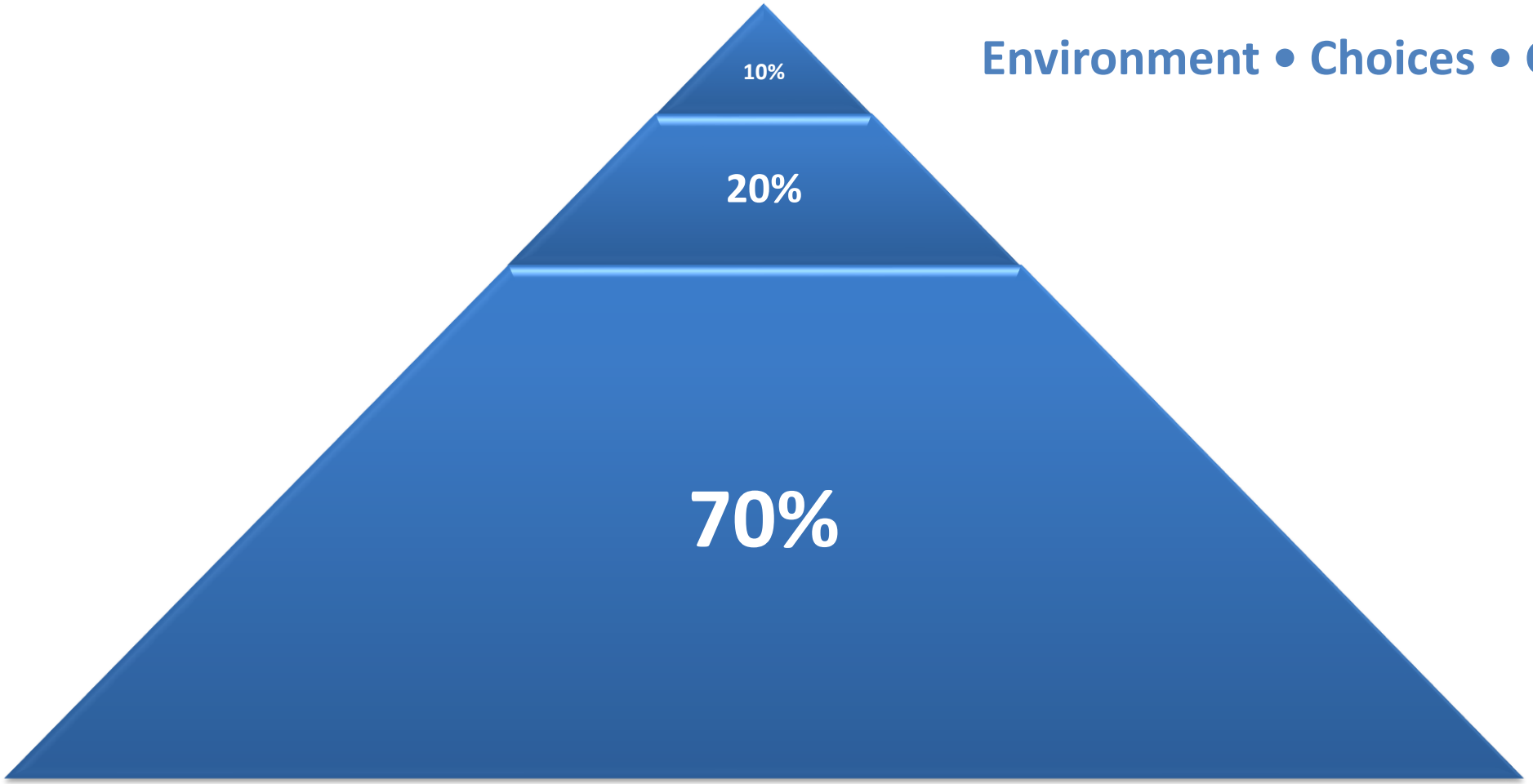


# Two Kinds of Bias Corrupt Our Response to Obesity

- **Intellectual bias**
  favoring personal convictions
- **Weight bias**
  directed at people with obesity

God Judging Adam, Etching by William Blake / WikiArt

# People Typically View Obesity as the Result of Poor Choices




Environment • Choices • Genes

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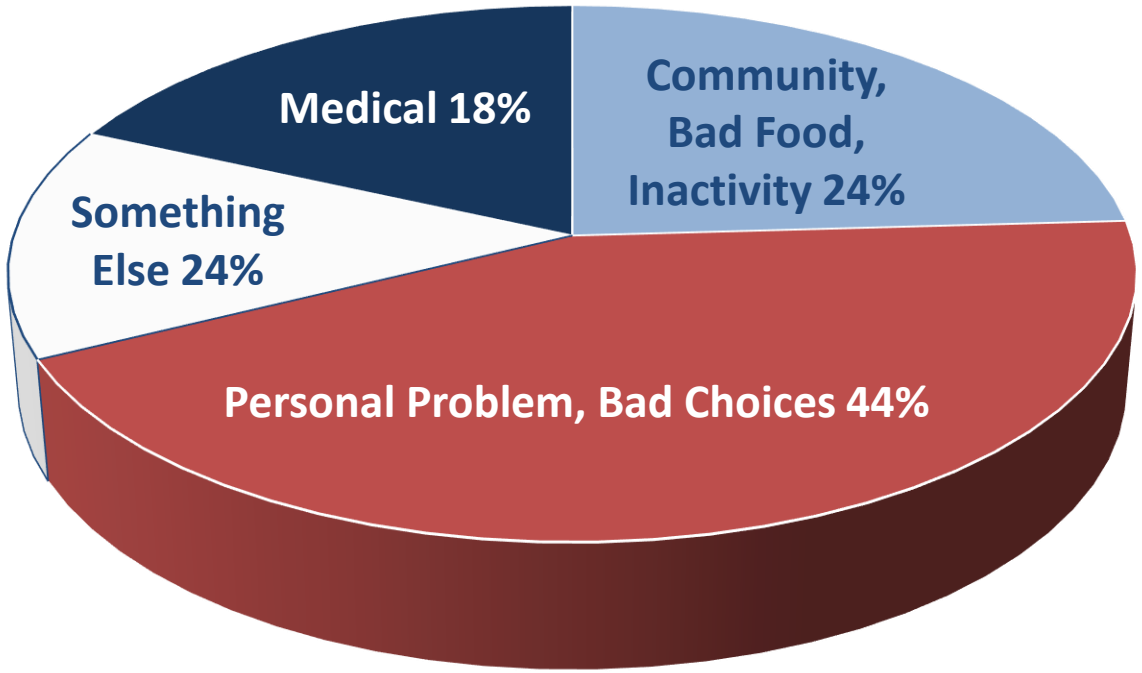
# Long Viewed as a Matter of Choice

"Which phrase comes closest to describing the type of problem that you think obesity is?" (Feb 2013)




- Bad personal choices was the dominant explanation in 2013
- Data from ongoing tracking
- Respondents asked to pick one

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Source: ConscienHealth research 2013.02

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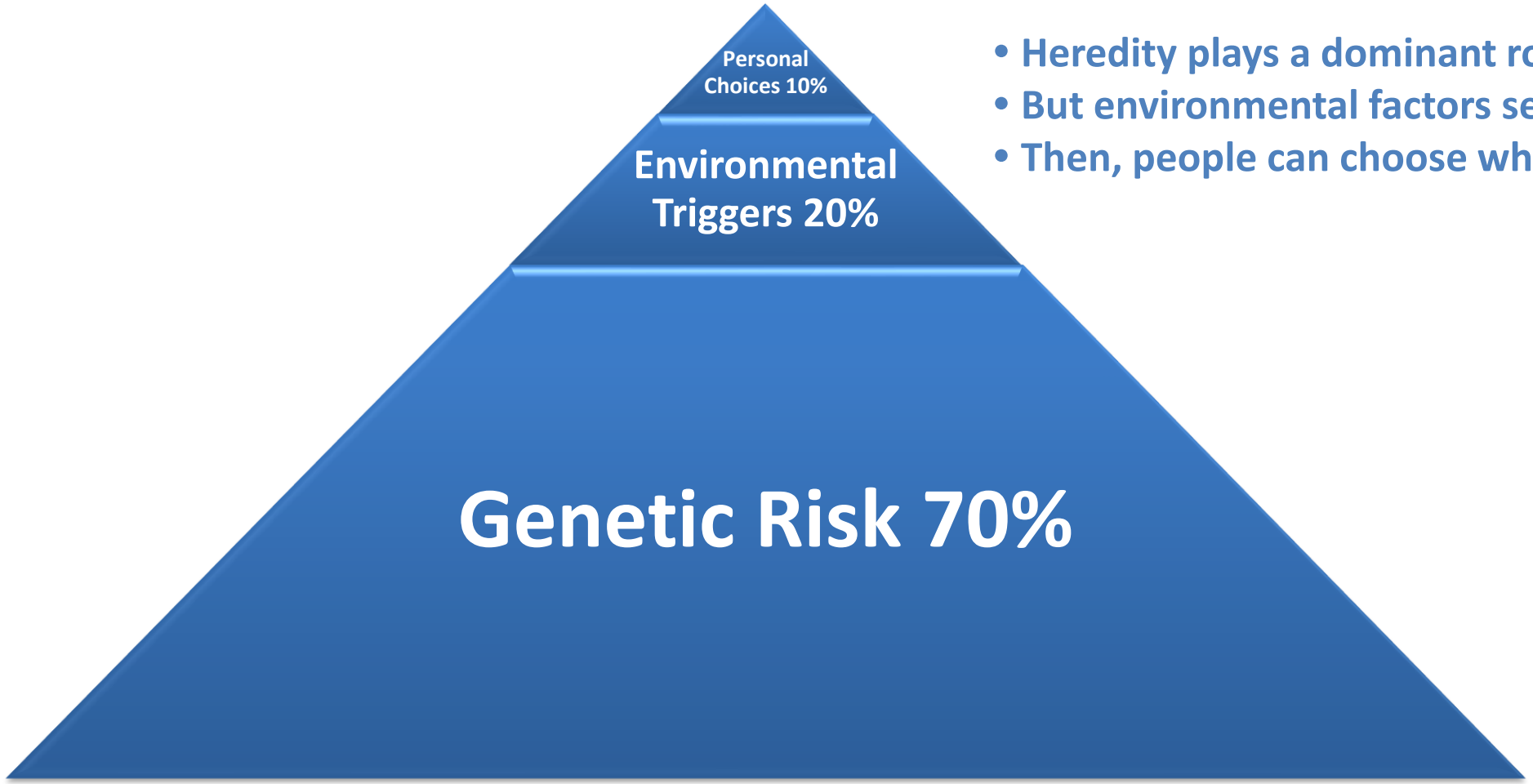
## The Truth Is That

# Obesity Is a Highly Heritable Chronic Disease




- Heredity plays a dominant role in obesity risk
- But environmental factors serve to activate it
- Then, people can choose what to do about it

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Source: Musani, Erickson, and Allison, 2008, *AJCN*

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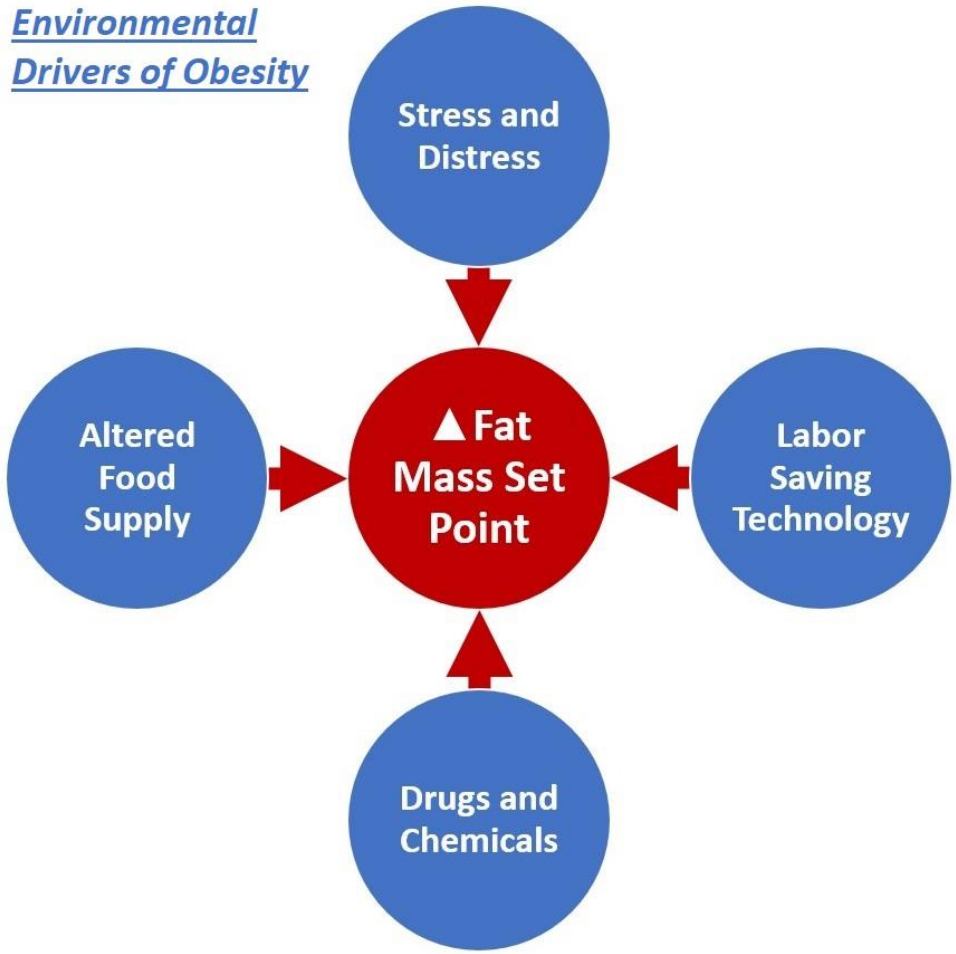
# A Perfect Storm of Environmental Triggers



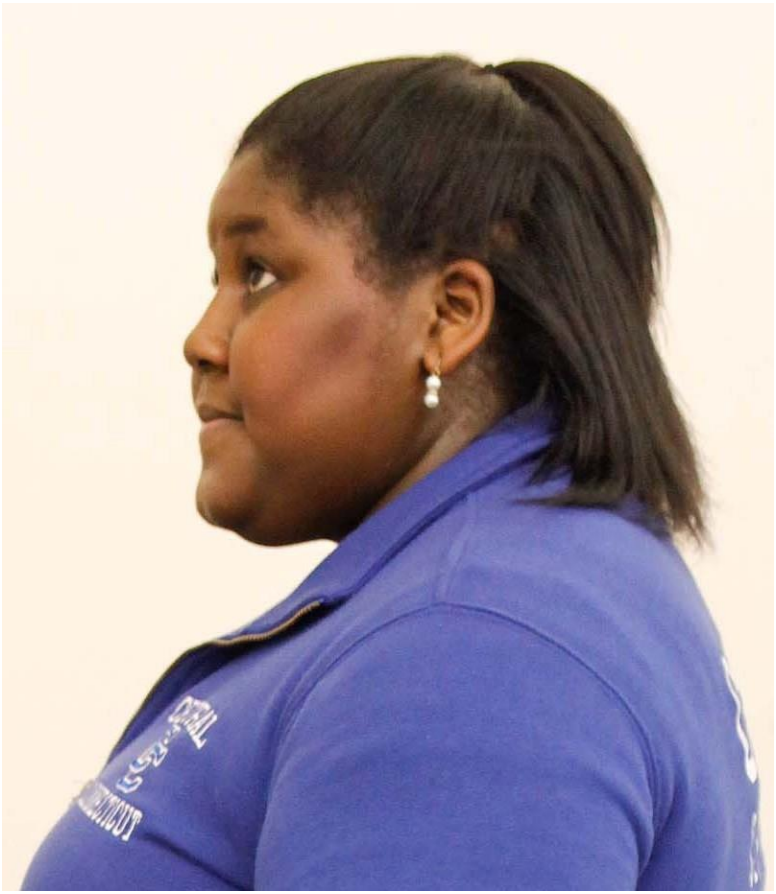

- **Simplistic explanations are invariably wrong**
- **The more accurate view is a perfect storm of multiple factors**



References: Ravussin & Ryan, 2017, What's Behind the Obesity Epidemic?; Kaplan, 2018, Harvard Blackburn Obesity Course

# Weight Bias Flows from Common Assumptions About People with Obesity

Untitled, photograph by Boohoomian / flickr



Photograph courtesy of the UCONN Rudd Center

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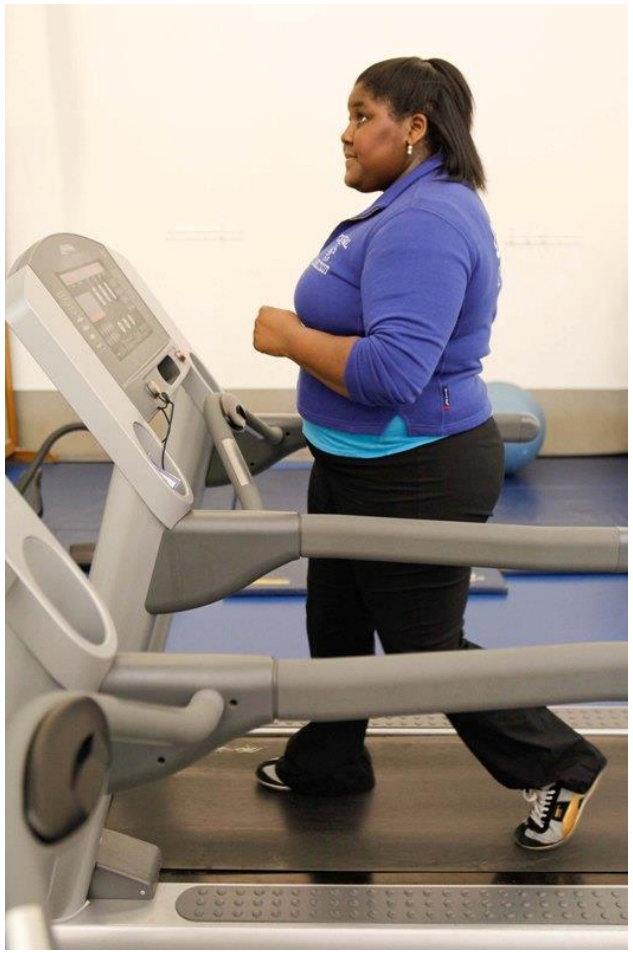
# Assumptions Can Be Wildly Misleading



# Demeaning Stereotypes About People with Obesity

- Lazy
- Stupid
- Undisciplined
- Sloppy
- Awkward
- Losers
- Dishonest
- Won't follow directions
- Uniformly unhealthy
- Ignorant about nutrition
- Lives spent gorging on junk food

*In the Kitchen, photograph © Obesity Action Coalition / OAC Image Gallery*

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# Bias Compromises Quality of Care

The New York Times

## *Why Do Obese Patients Get Worse Care? Many Doctors Don't See Past the Fat*

By GINA KOLATA SEPT. 25, 2016

Sarah Bramblette, who advocates awareness of

You must lose weight, a doctor told Sarah Bramblette, advising a 1,200-calorie-a-day diet. But Ms. Bramblette had a basic question: How much do I weigh?

The doctor's scale went up to 350 pounds, and she was heavier than that. If she did not know the number, how would she know if the diet was working?

The doctor had no answer. So Ms. Bramblette, 39, who lived in Ohio at the time, resorted to a solution that made her burn with shame. She drove to a nearby junkyard that had a scale that could weigh her. She was 502 pounds.

One in three Americans is obese, a rate that has been steadily growing for more

- Less empathetic care
- Less preventive care
- Patients feel berated and disrespected
- Obesity blamed for every symptom

***"You could walk in with an ax sticking out of your head and they would tell you your head hurt because you are fat."***

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# Bias Sets Up a Vicious Cycle That Fuels Obesity

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Source: UCONN Rudd Center

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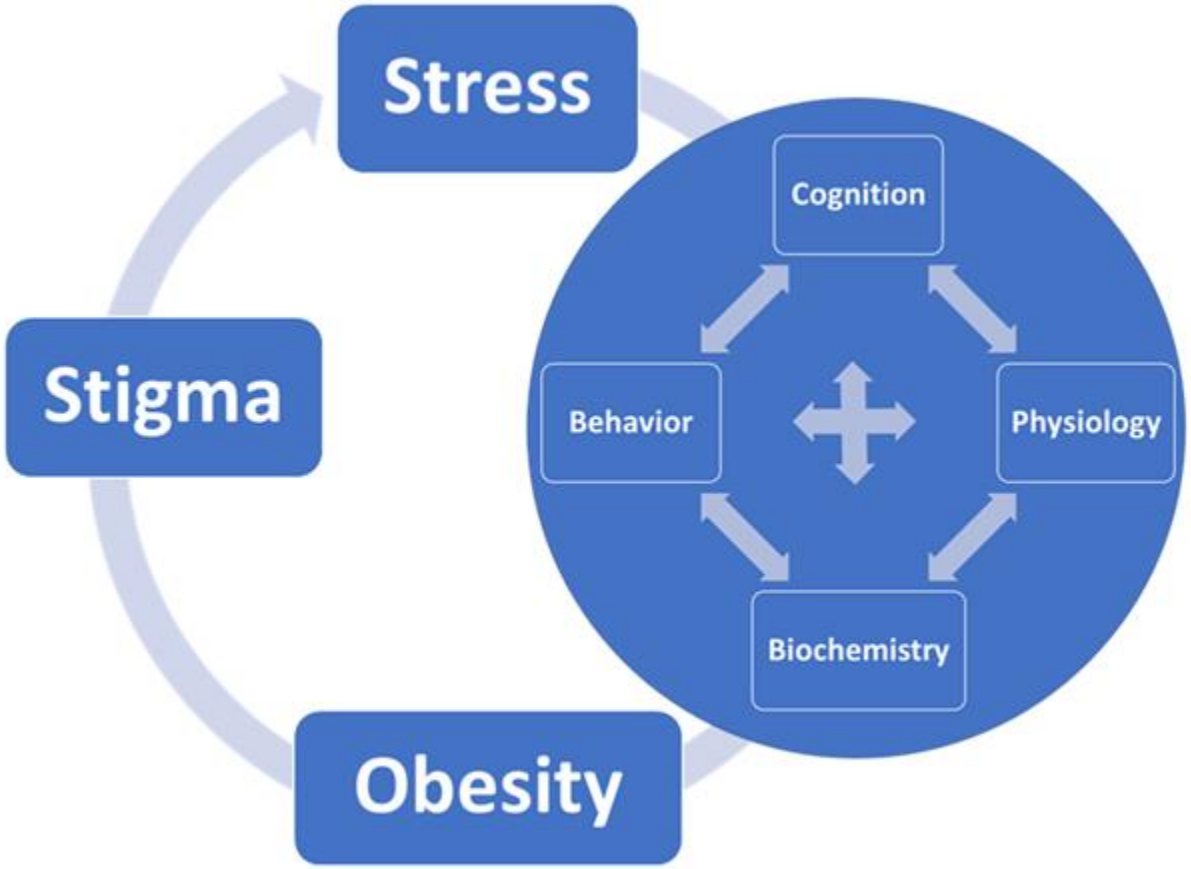
# Living with Discrimination Makes People Sicker

***Pathways from stress to obesity***




Source: Tomiyama, 2019, *Ann Rev Psych*

# Bias Gets in the Way of Progress

Blame, image © Ian Design / flickr

- Stigma leads to denial and inaction
  - Blame directed at people with obesity
  - Assumptions of
    - Laziness
    - Poor discipline
  - Social rejection
- People seek less care, get poor care, so health suffers
- Leads to ineffective policies

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# Explicit Weight Bias Is Fading

| Dimension | Explicit Bias Trend 2007-2016 |
|---|---|
| Sexuality | Down |
| Race | Down |
| Skin Tone | Down |
| Age | Down |
| Disability | Down |
| Weight | Down |

Source: Charlesworth and Banaji, 2018, Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Attitudes, Long-Term Change and Stability From 2007 to 2016

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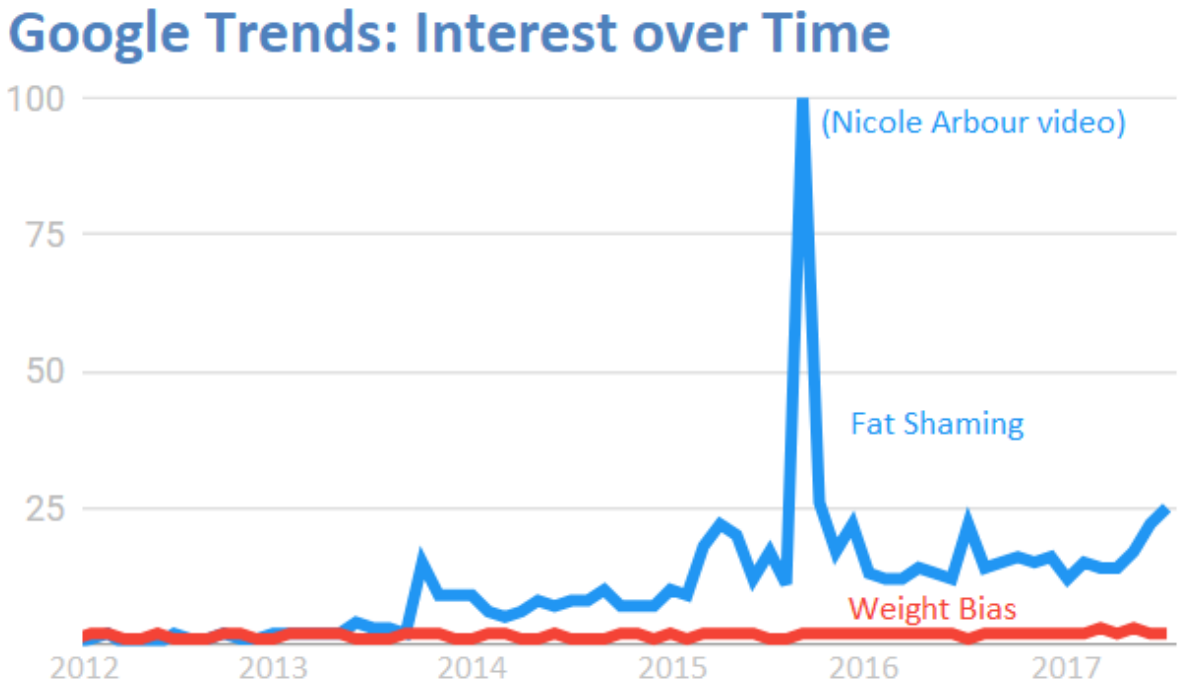
# Weight Bias Concerns Have Moved into Popular Culture, Labeled as Fat Shaming




- Multiple social movements
  - Body positivity
  - Feminism
  - Fat acceptance
  - Obesity activism
- Converged to make fat shaming unacceptable

Source: Google Trends data, 2017.07

# Unfortunately, Implicit Bias Is Growing

| Dimension | Explicit Bias Trend 2007-2016 | Implicit Bias Trend 2001-2016 |
|---|---|---|
| Sexuality | Down | Down |
| Race | Down | Down |
| Skin Tone | Down | Down |
| Age | Down | Flat |
| Disability | Down | Flat |
| Weight | Down | Up |

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Source: Charlesworth and Banaji, 2018, Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Attitudes, Long-Term Change and Stability From 2007 to 2016

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# Policy Implications of Bias About Obesity

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# Isn't Obesity Just the Result of Eating More Calories Than You Burn?

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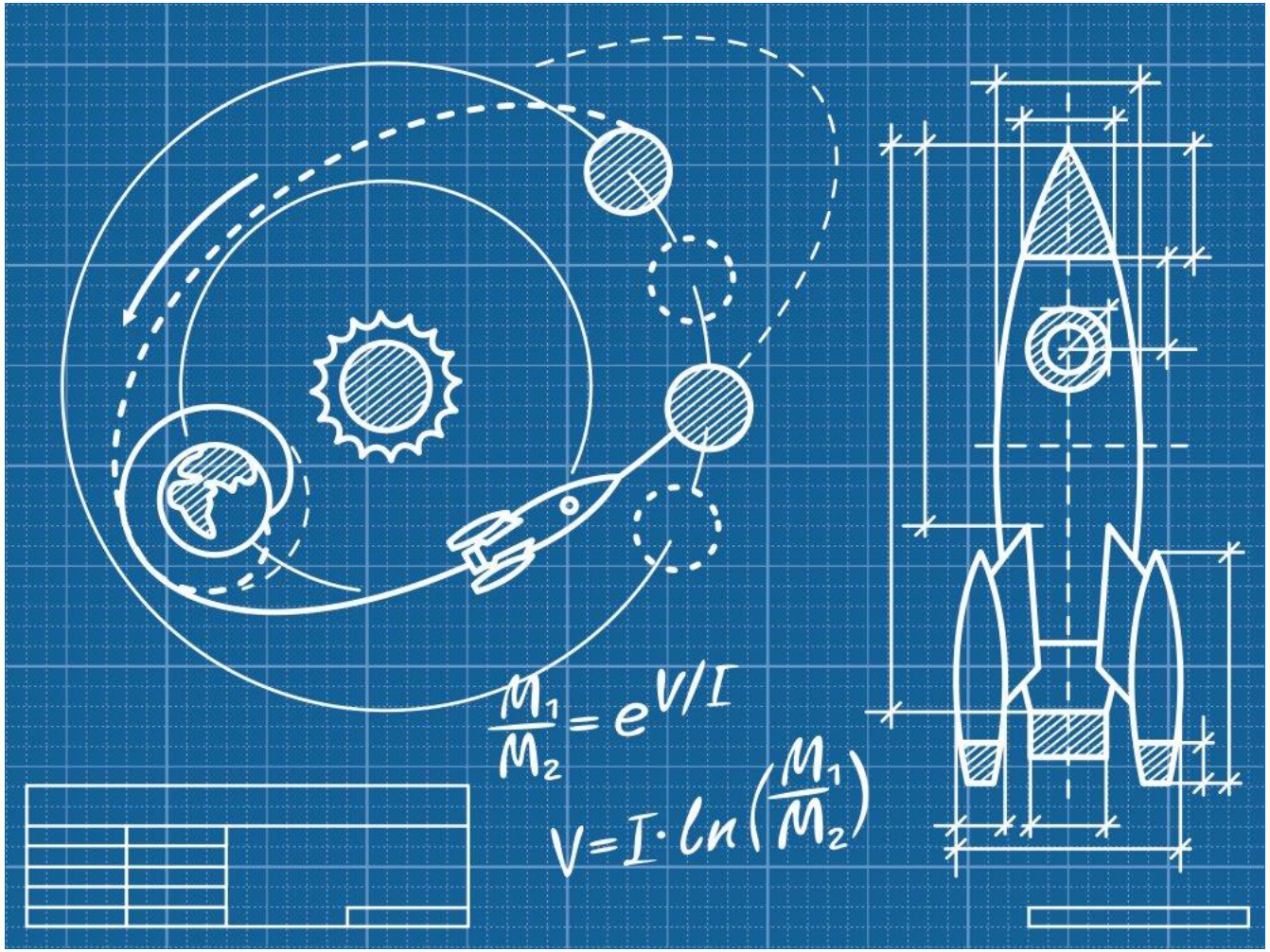
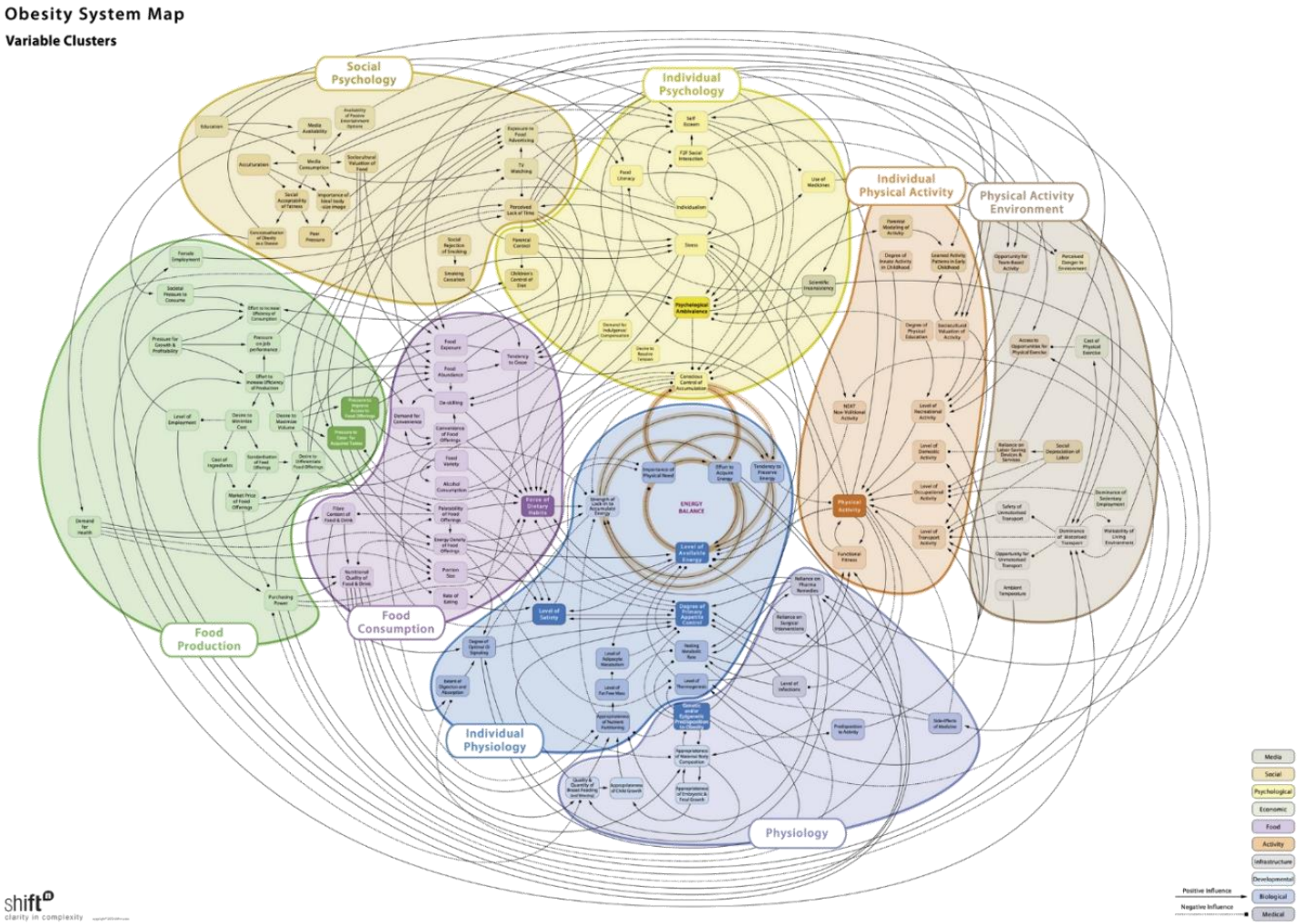
# Rocket Science May Be Complicated



# But Obesity Is Far More Complex




Source: Vandenbroeck IP, Goossens J, Clemens M. 2007. Building the Obesity System Map.

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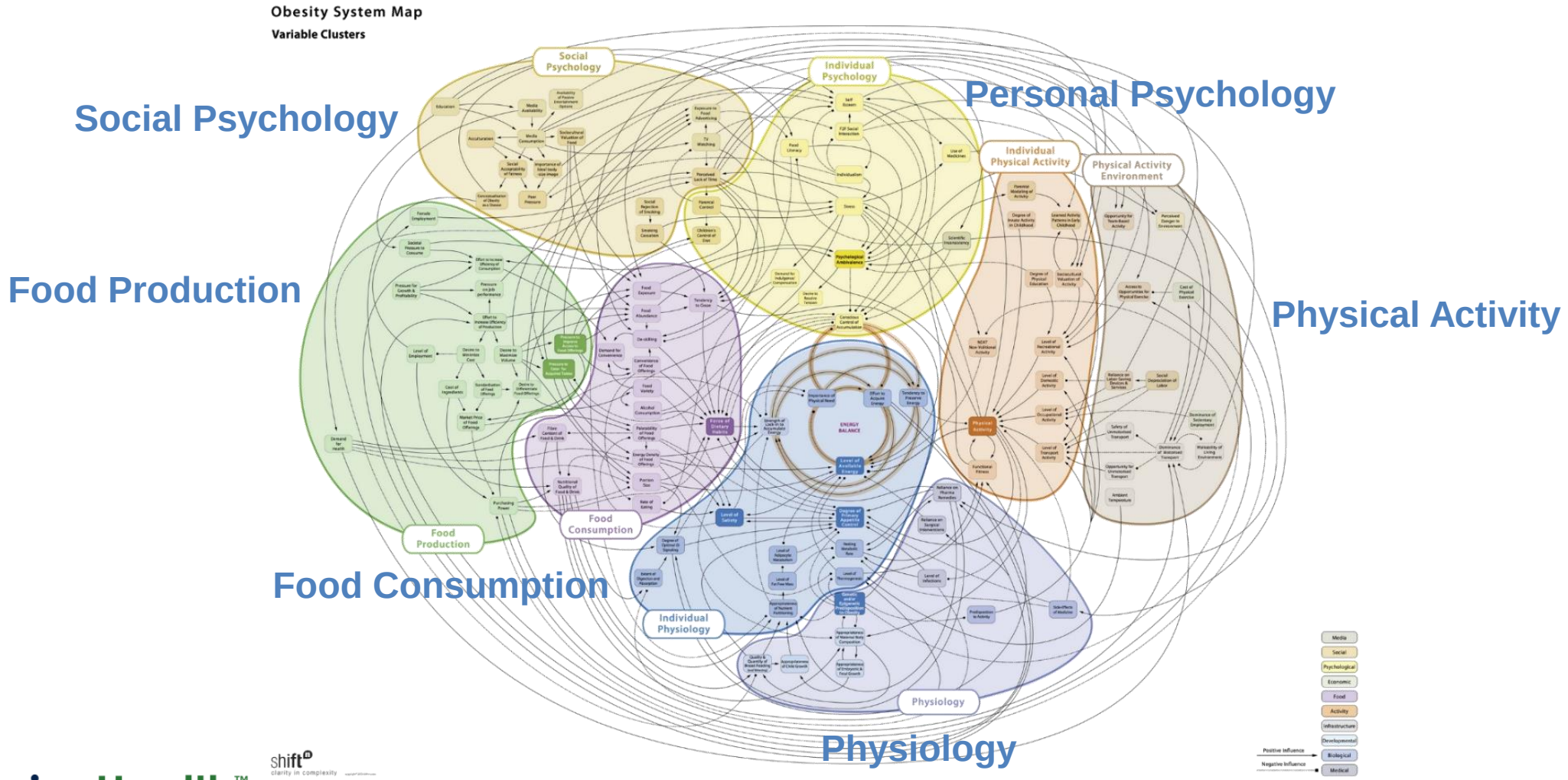
# Obesity Grows from Complex, Adaptive Systems




Source: Vandenbroeck IP, Goossens J, Clemens M. 2007. Building the Obesity System Map.

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# Bias Drives
# Policy Decisions That Affect Clinical Care

Eugene, photograph © Garen Dibartolomeo

*"Prevention obviously has to be the primary strategy for dealing with obesity, because there's just too much obesity to treat."*

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# Only 37 Clinics for 5 Million Children with Severe Obesity

Source: http://conscienhealth.org/2017/02/childhood-obesity-treatment-programs-serve-many/

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# Self-Care Is Often the Only Option Available for Obesity

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# Many Health Plans Discourage People from Seeking Obesity Care

*Saving Cash, photograph © 401(K) 2012 / flickr*

- Routine policy exclusions for obesity
  "Regardless of any potential health benefit"
- Lifetime procedure caps
- High out of pocket costs
- Problematic reimbursement rates and procedures
- But, obesity complications are fully covered

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# Good Evidence-Based Care Uses the Entire Continuum

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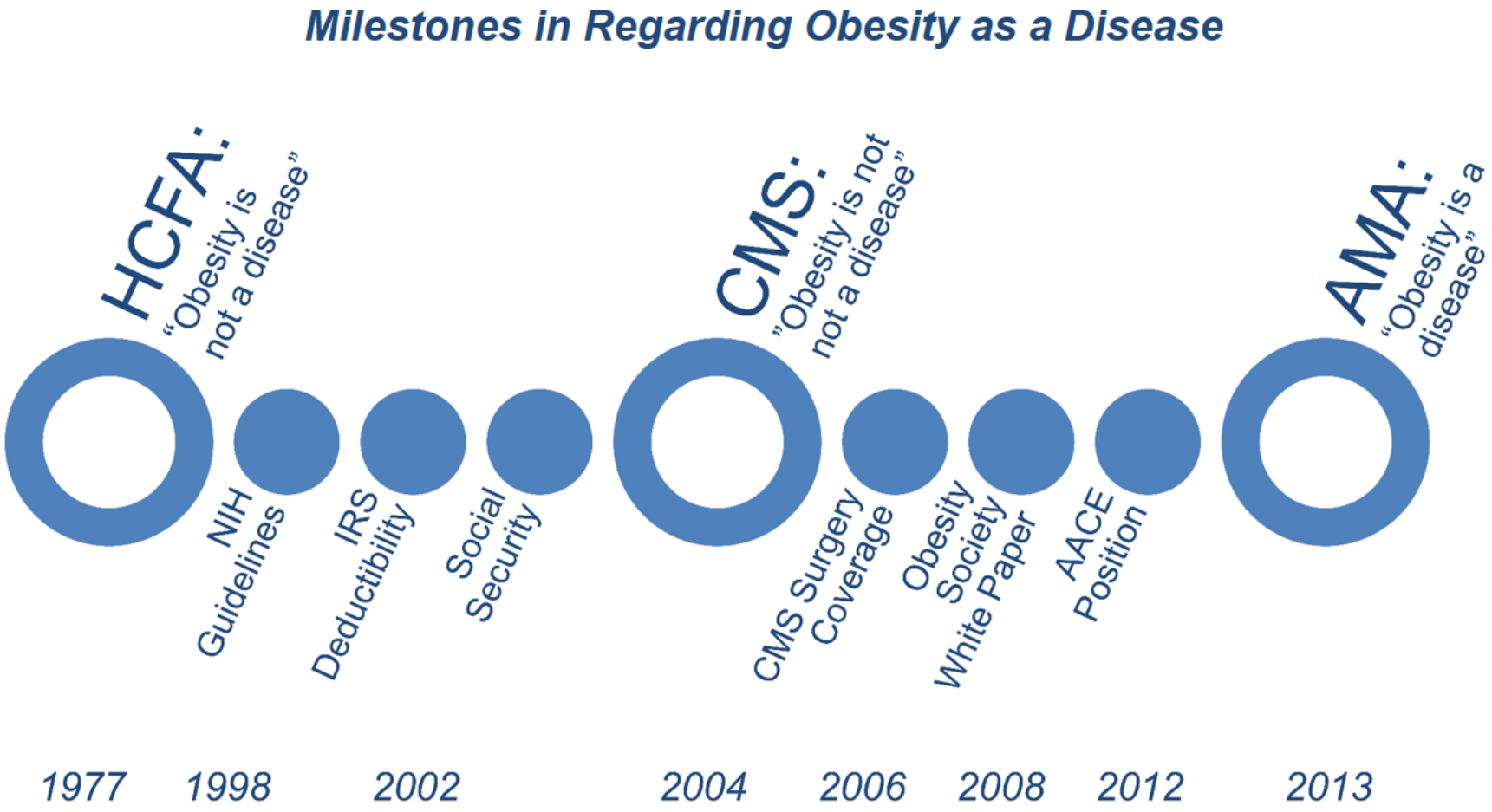
# Movement Toward Progress Against Obesity

# In 2013 AMA Declared Obesity Is a Complex, Chronic Disease

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Source: Kyle, Dhurandhar, and Allison, *Endocrinol Metab Clin North Am,* 2016.09

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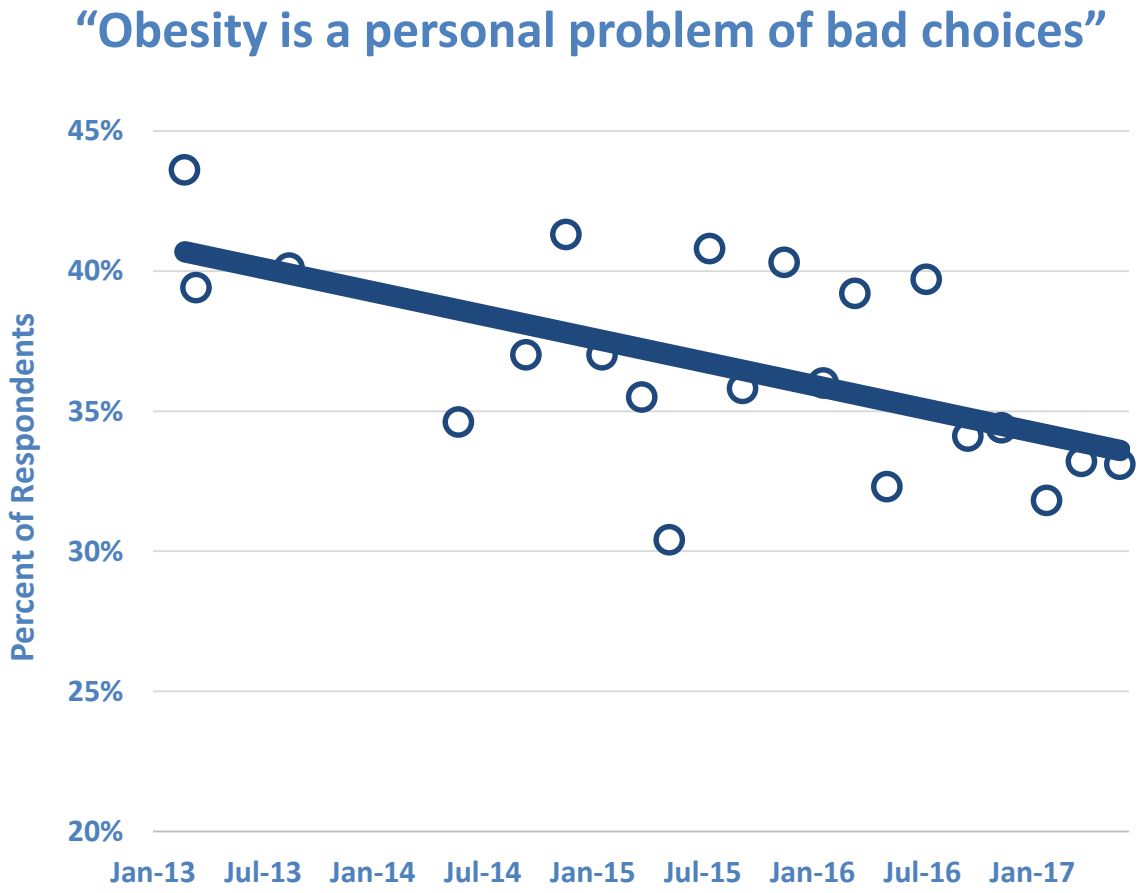
# Public Views Began a Slow Shift




- Fewer people think of obesity as a problem of bad personal choices
- People are shifting toward more diverse views of obesity

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Source: ConscienHealth/OAC weight bias tracking research, 2017.05

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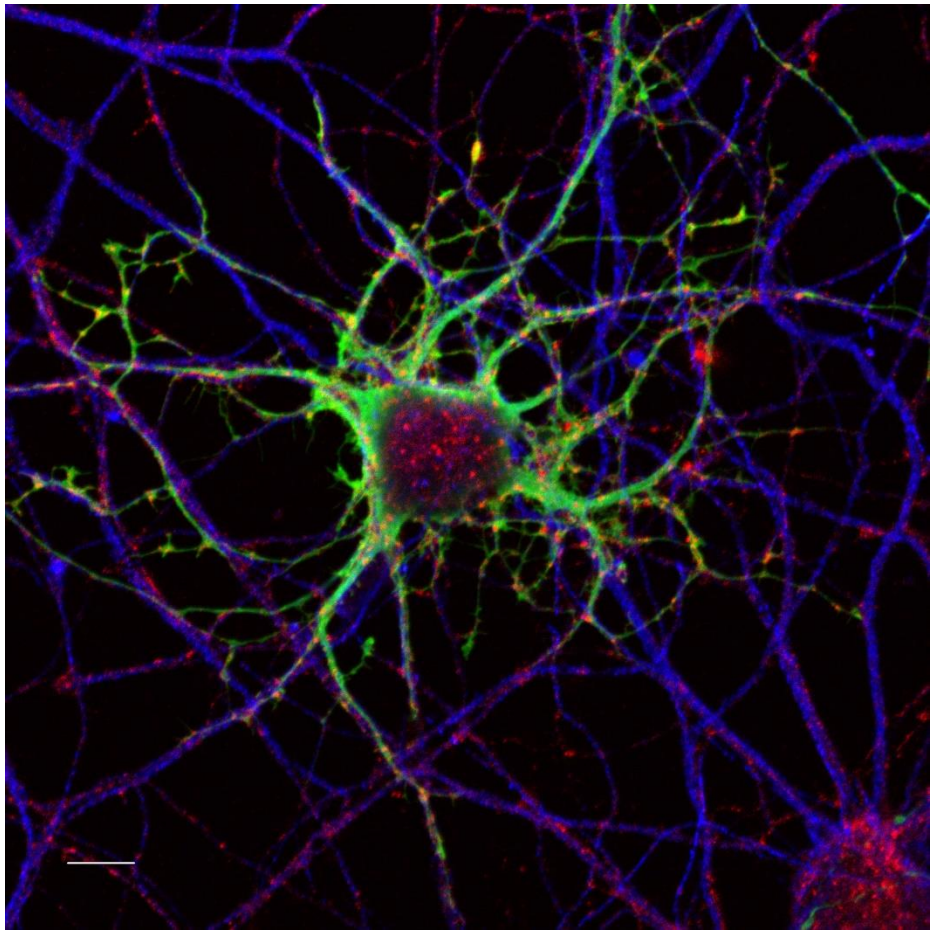
# Obesity Science
# Is Bringing Better Insights and Solutions



*Neurons, photograph © ZEISS Microscopy / flickr*

- Hypothalamus controls fat mass and blood sugar
- More therapies to manage obesity
- Bariatric surgery extends life and puts diabetes in remission

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# Summary of Opportunities

## Better progress will require:

- Objectivity to replace bias
- Curiosity about obesity and the people it affects
- Care for these people

Targets of Opportunity, photograph by Randy Robertson / flickr

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