No sugar! I'm an economist

Economists are getting in on the obesity debate by bringing in the tools of data analysis and behavioural economics.

Deirdre Macken

Rory Robertson is an economist on mission and this time sugar is in his sights. Sugar, he says, was making him fat; it's making the world fat and no nutritionist is going to deter him from making the world have another look at it.

The nutritionist in his sights is the well-respected Jennie Brand-Miller and her paper, The Australian Paradox, which concludes that sugar isn't a culprit in the obesity epidemic.

"It was for me," says Robertson. "Cutting out sugar had a profound effect on my eating and it did for thousands of others. So when I read a story about the sugar paradox, I thought, 'Who are these people?'" Professor Jennie Brand-Miller asked the same question of Rory Robertson.

Robertson isn't known for his expertise in diets. Like most economists, he is more informed about gross domestic product than the Glycemic Index, but like other economists, he is turning his attention to one of society's biggest health costs: obesity.

The entry of economists into the health debate is upsetting some traditional experts who keep their own rates of eating habits and rations.

An economist's guide to eating reads something like this. "They are expensive winos, you'd drink less of it. Serve dinner on a bread plate, it will look like lemons. Place a public bet on yourself losing weight, it will triple the incentive. And have this friends - they will be your benchmark for a healthy weight.

"We should insert a warning here: these guidelines haven't been endorsed by any health body. But those who are familiar with concepts like availability, framing and contagion will recognize what's going on with the small plates, prickly winos and thin friends.

"Economists are bringing the tools of data analysis, behavioural economics and slow eating habits to our eating habits. And the result is a slow of new books: An Economist's Guide to Eating by the former economist, foodie blogger, Peter Cowen, Henry's Restaurant America in the Land of the Free: And the Home of the Fat by economist, Richard McKenzie, and the upcoming Culinary Intelligence by a rookie with a strategic approach, Peter Kaminsky.

"Three, combined with several economic studies on why people got fat and how some stay thin, are adding a novel twist to the health challenge of the Western world. But what does does this mean? Know about nutrition?"

That's what Brand-Miller asked recently of an analysis done by Rory Robertson. To which, one could respond that nutritionists haven't solved the obesity problem so why not give economists a go.

Indeed, a quick survey of prominent Australian economists shows that most believe that they are well equipped to not just propose financial solutions but to explore how we get fat and what strategies we can use to trim down.

Paul Frijters is an economist from the University of Queensland and he's recently studied links between happiness and eating behaviour - evidently people who eat more fruit and vegetables are happier but whether it makes them happy or they eat it because they're happy isn't clear. He defends the entry of economists into the debate by pointing out obesity is now a big cost on the economy.

"By and large we put it in the basket of individual taste but we are concerned when costs are imposed on others and the costs of the obesity epidemic are increasingly borne by community," he says. "A few years ago in the US, it was calculated that every obese person cost an extra $US2500 a year in extra health costs. That's when economists wake up.

"But the fiscal lead on the community is only the starting point. Economies bring a different mindset to problems and if there is one constant theme in how they look at the weight problems of the world it is this: they look at the behaviour of eating, whereas many health scientists focus on what we're eating."

Deborah Cobb-Clark, a professor from the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research says that the behaviours that influence our money decisions are the same behaviours that are behind our eating decisions.

"When you have a model for how people make decisions about food, it gives you better insights," she says. "For instance, people know the food message, they know the health benefits of eating well and they will tell you why they shouldn't eat chocolate sunrise while they are eating."

"So, what's going on? It's a struggle between the immediate benefits and long-term benefits that they see in their mind and that is not that different to people's savings behaviour. We have two parts of the brain - rational and impulsive - and we make both explicit and implicit decisions and they go directly to food in the same way we do about savings."

It's not surprising then that people who are sensible about savings are also sensible with portion control. Both Frijters and Cobb-Clark point to the established fact that people who are successful and happy also tend to be fit and relatively trim, whereas the opposite is true of poorer people. Health professionals have offered many reasons for this - poorer people can't afford good food, they aren't as well informed about food choices or they don't live in areas where they can exercise easily.

Economists offer a few extra insights into the class divide of health.

Cobb-Clark's research using HILDA (Household, income and Labour Dynamics in Australia) data suggests that it is all about feeling in control of your life. "People who believe they are in control of their lives will make investments in themselves and will have good outcomes," she says. But, she adds, the reasons may lie in themselves and are different to the reasons women do.

"Men's health investments seem to be linked to the expectation it will affect their health," she says. "Women are highly motivated by body image."

Another insight into control comes from the commitment site, sticki.com, which was developed by a couple of economists. This site lets people make public commitments about their goals, holds them to account (through friendship groups) and rewards them if they reach their goals.

According to a study in 2008, those who have a financial incentive to lose weight are five times more likely to succeed and, according to the sticki research, 70 per cent of people who bet on themselves on the site, reach their goal.

Yet another theory comes from the Australian-born, Europe-based economist, Andrew Oswald.

In a recent paper, he said weight levels were contiguous and "people subconsciously keep up with the
Sweet revenge

The fight between economist Rory Robertson and nutritionist Jennie Brand-Miller over the role of sugar in the diet has heated up. The debate has moved from the traditional exchanges of the academic world to the pages of the Sydney Morning Herald, with Brand-Miller responding to Robertson's claims about the dangers of sugar.

Robertson has been a vocal critic of the sugar industry, arguing that sugar is a major contributor to obesity and other health problems. Brand-Miller, on the other hand, has emphasized the role of overall calorie intake and the importance of a balanced diet.

The debate has implications for policy makers and consumers, as the issue of obesity continues to be a major concern in many countries.

For more information on this topic, please refer to the article in the Sydney Morning Herald.