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LETTER

Knowledge of personal anthropometrics among South African high school learners

Between June and September 2000 I was a principal investigator for a youth risk behaviour survey in a school district in the North West Province. Although the sample included Grade 10 and 12 learners, the data collected revealed lack of knowledge of personal anthropometrics. The two questions relating to height and weight were mostly left unreported or given responses that were obviously wrong. But am I being fair to expect learners to know their height and weight? What provisions are made in the school curriculum for this? Or is it the responsibility of the school to address that aspect of learning or the practical application of numeracy?

With regard to the question on height, 1 813 of the 3 113 learners (58.2%) did not respond and the assumption is that they don't know how tall they are. Of the remaining 41.8% who responded to the question, 50 (1.6%) gave their heights as 1 m. Accepting that the majority of adolescents are between 1.4 m and 2 m tall, 828 or 26.5% of the sample know or have a good estimation of their height. The rest recorded heights of up to 9.8 m.

With regard to the question on weight, 1 295 pupils (41.6%) did not respond and 6.8% reported weights of between 1 kg and 35 kg. Again, accepting that the majority of these learners weigh between 45 kg and 80 kg, only 37% of the learners know or have a good estimation of their weight.

A significant part of issues relating to personal health focus on body mass index, and you can't begin to talk about that without knowing weight and height. Realisation of the poor knowledge of anthropometrics poses a question regarding whether this is a true reflection of the status of our health education curriculum.

In conclusion, there is a lot of work to be done in life skills in general and personal health in particular among children (and perhaps many adults). The question is, where do we start? Who is supposed to teach it? Do we accept anthropometrics as an important aspect in health matters? What other public health knowledge is lacking in our endeavour to enhance preventive health?

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