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Nomenclature of optimal BMI: slim's the word

Sir,

Researchers into subjects such as obesity, anorexia nervosa, and body shape are currently hampered by the lack of any generally accepted expression for people whose body mass index (BMI¹) is within the optimal range. Those with excessive BMI are termed fat or obese, those with too low a BMI are called thin—but there is no word for those whose BMI lies between the undesirable extremes. We suggest that the word 'slim' should be adopted to describe people of 'optimal' BMI—those who are neither fat nor thin, and whose BMI is presumed to be near that which is the most healthy and attractive.^{2–4}

Slim has the advantage of being a familiar word (at least in the UK) and of having positive connotations—to be called slim is a compliment. Furthermore, in a world where mild to moderate obesity is endemic, slim is correctly used to refer to those who are somewhat below the population average weight for their height. The only disadvantage of 'slim' is that when used to describe women it tends to conjure-up a willowish profile—shapely but not curvaceous. This may indeed be the appearance associated with an optimal BMI for tall women, but shorter women whose BMI is rated as optimally attractive and who are most fertile tend to have a more 'hour-glass' figure.^{3,5}

With this note of caution, and given the convenience of using an everyday term—we suggest that in

future when it comes to describing optimal BMI—slim's the word.

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Pigmentation, melanocortins and red hair

Sir,

Rees and Flanagan in their Editorial 'Pigmentation, melanocortins and red hair' (*QJM* 1999; **92**:125–31) make a number of asides. They write 'Melanoma may be the evolutionary price paid for protection against burning'. The fact is that Africans, best protected from sun rays, do not have melanoma on pigmented skin, their melanoma is typically on their (unpigmented) feet, where it used to be much more common before they began to wear shoes. White horses as well as greys do develop melanoma, as do red-haired dogs. Red hair is not a mainly Irish-Welsh attribute and not a 'Northern' characteristic. One can find numerous red-haired people in Sicily and Calabria, and it is said that the Phoenicians had red hair.

The mechanisms selecting for pigmentation among mammals and birds are confusing. That forest dwellers benefit from dark colour may be easy to comprehend. Melanism at altitude may relate to forests. But why should there be melanistic buzzards and egrets?

Red-haired women have had a reputation of being lascivious, have been accused of witchcraft, but also have been considered to faint easily and to be difficult to anaesthetize. Perhaps this is prejudice, discrimination. Perhaps such traits, (including witchcraft?) are coded for.