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Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874)—the average man and indices of obesity FREE

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Abstract

The quest for a practical index of relative body weight that began shortly after actuaries reported the increased mortality of their overweight policyholders culminated after World War II, when the relationship between weight and cardiovascular disease became the subject of epidemiological studies. It became evident then that the best index was the ratio of the weight in kilograms divided by the square of the height in meters, or the Quetelet Index described in 1832. Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) was a Belgian mathematician, astronomer and statistician, who developed a passionate interest in probability calculus that he applied to study human physical characteristics and social aptitudes. His pioneering cross-sectional studies of human growth led him to conclude that other than the spurts of growth after birth and during puberty, ‘the weight increases as the square of the height’, known as the Quetelet Index until it was termed the Body Mass Index in 1972 by Ancel Keys (1904–2004).

For his application of comparative statistics to social conditions and moral issues, Quetelet is considered a founder of the social sciences. His principal work, ‘A Treatise of Man and the development of his faculties’ published in 1835 is considered ‘one of the greatest books of the 19th century’. A tireless promoter of statistical data collection based on standard methods and definitions, Quetelet organized in 1853 the first International Statistical Congress, which launched the development of ‘a uniform nomenclature of the causes of death applicable to all countries’, progenitor of the current International Classification of Diseases.

Keywords: [Adolphe Quetelet](#), [Body Mass Index](#), [International Classification of Diseases](#), [obesity](#), [probability calculus](#), [Quetelet Index](#), [statistics](#)

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