

The future doesn't look sweet for our children



Debbie Hicks

Nurse Consultant – Diabetes, Enfield Community Services, Barnet, Enfield & Haringey Mental Health Trust, Enfield

Obesity is a threat both to the health of children and to the economy, costing the NHS billions of pounds every year. Already a third of children are too fat by the time they leave primary school. Senior doctors have said that, without a tougher strategy, children will be condemned to a lifetime of illness, including heart disease, diabetes and cancer (Boseley, 2016).

Unfortunately, on 18 August 2016, Theresa May told Parliament that the proposed “childhood obesity strategy” to tackle this problem by curbing junk food advertising has been changed and will, instead, encourage supermarkets and manufacturers to cut the amount of sugar in their products. Ministers have been accused of a “shocking abdication of responsibility” and heavily criticised by doctors and dentists for watering down the strategy (Swinford, 2016).

Plans to ban advertisements for unhealthy foods before the 9 pm watershed and to ban junk food from supermarket checkouts have been dropped. Food manufacturers will instead be challenged to reduce the level of sugar by a fifth in products such as cereals, yoghurts, sweets and desserts by 2020. The Government will initially take a voluntary approach but claims to be prepared to introduce legislation to force companies to act if they fail to reduce sugar levels sufficiently. The Treasury will also push ahead with plans for a tax on sugary drinks, while primary schools will be expected to ensure pupils get 60 minutes of exercise a day.

However, the British Medical Association (BMA), which represents doctors, said that failing to introduce legislation to force food manufacturers to cut sugar levels makes the policy “pointless” (BMA, 2016). Professor Parveen Kumar, Chair of the BMA’s board of science, said: “This strategy was meant to be published a year ago, we’ve had a year of delays

and now it has been watered down to a plan that doesn’t even include marketing restrictions. It is incredibly disappointing that the Government appears to have failed to include plans for tighter controls on marketing and promotion” (Swinford, 2016).

Public Health England will set targets for sugar content per 100 g of product and calorie caps for specific single-serving products. They will initially cover cereals, yoghurts, biscuits, cakes, confectionery, pastries, puddings, ice cream and sweet spreads. From 2017, the programme will be extended to include targets to reduce total calories in a wider range of products.

When I look out of the front of the primary care centre where I work, I can see numerous shops, but by far the most common is the fast food takeaway shops serving kebabs, fried chicken and chips. Unfortunately, this food is relatively cheap and readily available, which makes it attractive to a wide group of the local population. The Borough of Enfield has the second highest rate of childhood obesity in London, which is scary as we are currently facing 1000 new cases of diabetes each year. This rate will continue to rise unless there is a major campaign to change lifestyle behaviour in our younger generations. ■

Boseley S (2016) Childhood obesity: UK’s “inexcusable” strategy is wasted opportunity, say experts. *The Guardian*, London. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2bfDuQa> (accessed 02.09.16)

British Medical Association (2016) *BMA response to the government’s disappointing childhood obesity strategy*. BMA, London. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2b19Gzg> (accessed 02.09.16)

Swinford S (2016) Theresa May abandons plans to curb junk food advertising and ban sweets from store checkouts. *The Telegraph*, London. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2b63mx1> (accessed 02.09.16)

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Childhood obesity: A plan for action is available to read at: <http://bit.ly/2bDsIKK>
 Let us know your thoughts on the strategy by emailing us at: jdn@omniamed.com