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Reversing the trend

The EU should empower children and parents to make healthier choices, writes **John Dalli**



Obesity is one of the greatest health challenges that Europe is currently facing. It is particularly alarming that obesity is not solely a problem of adults any more, but has now reached our children. One out of four children aged between six and nine is overweight or obese. They are at risk of developing cardiovascular diseases and type-2 diabetes later in life.

The cause of high rates of overweight and obesity in Europe is clear: a combination of lifestyle factors, such as unhealthy diets, poor eating habits and lack of physical activity. With multiple causes, a multifaceted approach must be taken to tackle this problem.

This is the essence behind the strategy for Europe on nutrition, overweight and obesity-related health issues in place since May 2007. The strategy sets out a broad framework for community policies towards preventing overweight and obesity, encompassing health, research, education, agriculture, transport, and media regulation. Children are a priority group in all these areas, as it is during childhood that healthy behaviours and life skills are established. We need to create an environment that supports young Europeans to be active and healthy members of society.

This includes providing Europeans with the right information about food products, to allow them to make well informed choices. The commission's legislative proposal on providing food information to consumers through mandatory nutrition labelling is currently under discussion in the European parliament and the council. Once adopted, it will constitute a major step forward in helping parents make healthier food choices for their children.

EU action on obesity needs to be developed through full cooperation with all interested parties. The commission has created the high level group on nutrition and physical activity, to enable member states to exchange ideas and coordinate national initiatives to promote healthier diets and more physical activity. The commission also steers the EU platform for action on diet, physical activity and health whose members

commit themselves to act in key areas such as food reformulation and advertising food to children.

A recent external evaluation of this platform shows that self regulation can work in areas such as marketing and advertising but for that maximum impact actions need to be boosted through solid public health leadership.

In the past few years the European commission has put in place several initiatives that contribute to decreasing obesity. A number of these are specific-

"One out of four children aged between six and nine is overweight or obese"



Europe's first ever kids' TV series on healthy lifestyles

Children across Europe will be introduced to 'My Friend Boo' this autumn. The series, which has piloted a brand new approach to public policy messaging on issues like health, will be broadcast on leading channels in over 19 European countries. The series has been created by the Active project and supported by the European commission's health programme.

Series producer Luigi Petito said, "My Friend Boo is the first project of this scale to respond to the needs of Europe's new generation of young learners. We have taken issues like the importance of having a healthy lifestyle beyond the walls of formal learning places and translated them into a medium that kids love the most. The response from children has been overwhelmingly positive."

"We worked with paediatricians, nutritionists... and some of Europe's most creative young animators. But what was special, is that messages and stories were tested at each main production phase on hundreds of European children.

"If you make learning fun, it's more likely to engage people of all ages. We are hoping that the commission and other organisations will apply this approach across policy areas. For example, the stories are a great vehicle to teach children about all kinds of European priorities, such as media literacy... gender equality and cultural integration, and there is much more to say on health related issues".

The series is accompanied by teaching material which is downloadable from www.myfriendboo.com

ly focused on children. One example is the school fruit scheme which has provided children with fresh fruit and vegetables at school since 2008, thus encouraging healthy eating habits from a young age. The scheme also entails teaching schoolchildren the importance of healthy eating.

Actions to prevent obesity related diseases early in life must be based on solid scientific evidence. This is where research policy has a key role to play. In this context, the joint programming initiative "A healthy diet for a healthy life," aimed at strengthening research in this area has been recently set up. This initiative covers lifestyle and social determinants, prevention of chronic diseases, health maintenance, dietary advice and food production.

We do not want to legislate on lifestyles, but we need to empower our children and their parents to make healthier choices. Parents, policymakers, the medical community, the food industry and NGOs all have a role to play. We now need to build on progress made and intensify our coordinated efforts. Together we can take concrete action to help our children live healthier and more active lives. ★

John Dalli
is European
health and
consumer policy
commissioner

Eat your words

Confronting childhood obesity is an investment in Europe's future, argues **Frédérique Ries**

Frédérique Ries is a member of parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee

At the last plenary session when the parliament adopted its position on the 2011 draft budget, it confirmed a strong will to set the fight against obesity for the early stages of life as a priority. In this resolution MEPs recognised more precisely that the school fruit scheme and the school milk scheme are important programmes in terms of encouraging healthy diet among children. In other words, the European parliament reaffirmed that Europe can greatly contribute to this major health issue.

As the first rapporteur in 2006 on this very important social and health issue – the green paper on promoting healthy diets and physical activity – I am of course satisfied with the coherence of our message. On the other hand, I am also worried about recent figures, with over 15 million young European considered as overweight or obese, and a rise of around 400,000 new cases per year. It shows the current inability of the 27 member states to limit this scourge for our societies and clearly demonstrates that this is not considered a health priority at present.

As far as the European Union is concerned and taking account of the limited powers given by the treaties, we can objectively consider that we have achieved good results with, for example, more than 60 initiatives against obesity funded by the EU. But why stop half-way?

Europe can and must do more. It should start by integrating nutrition and physical activities into other EU policies as undertaken by DG Agriculture. The EU could also pave the way for different reforms. I'm thinking, of course, of giving priority to the essential reform of lower VAT rates for fruit and vegetables. It would be a simple way of encouraging all citizens, and in particular the lowest income earners, of having access to varied and balanced food. Another good idea would be to encourage, as part of the reform of the common agricultural policy, the promotion of short distributions channels and the selling of local food products.

Finally, tackling obesity is neither a question of labelling, nor a problem of a choice between self-regulation and strong regulation. It is essentially a question of education, both at home and at kindergarten. It is also linked with our capacity as family members, teachers, school meals decision makers to induce healthy habits in infants and children. It is as simple and as complicated as that.

This is why I welcome the 20th congress of the European childhood obesity group for which I will have the honour of being host on 17 November 2010 in the European parliament.

It will be an excellent opportunity for paediatricians, nutritional experts, researchers, law makers, and representatives of obesity associations to exchange local best practises and, despite the current socio-economic crisis, to deliver a clear message: fighting against obesity early in life is a long term investment Europe can well afford. ★



"Tackling obesity is neither a question of labelling, nor a problem of a choice between self-regulation and strong regulation; it is essentially a question of education"



Junk food for thought

Renate Sommer argues that without clear, easily decipherable rules, labelling systems can do as much harm as good

Whenever a crisis is looming there are calls for political action. That also holds true for the epidemic resulting from increasing childhood obesity. The prospect of a disease ridden future generation which faces a decrease in life expectancy has put the promotion of a healthy lifestyle high on the EU's agenda. However, national education campaigns and health policies, which are at the heart of the fight against obesity, lie in the hands of member states – a principle that has been stipulated in the Lisbon treaty. Consequently, European policies can only complement these initiatives.

One such complimentary tool is food labelling. Accordingly, a lot of energy has been poured into the discussion in the European parliament, resulting in proposals that often overshoot the actual goal of the regulation. Many MEPs tried to utilise food labelling to educate consumers in the supermarket. Putting parents under general suspicion of stupidity, they proposed warning labels on foodstuffs and a plethora of information on nutrients thus trying to force them into the right eating habits.

The problem inherent in the two main labelling schemes proposed by MEPs is the neglect of the greater picture. Neither colour coding (traffic light system), nor the adopted guideline daily amount system (GDA), takes into account the specific needs of children. Kids need a different composition of nutrients than adults. For example, the intake of calcium and minerals is highly important to strengthen the bones during their growth process. However, according to colour coding, many basic foods

providing these nutrients would be labelled with a red warning point, including cheese, milk, wholegrain bread and natural fruit juice. If parents refrain from buying these products due to the red warning points, they might risk malnutrition. For kids, on the other hand, red warning points on sweets like chocolate equate an interdiction and, to children, nothing is as tempting as the forbidden fruit.

In addition, parents who faithfully follow the regime of the GDA system won't do any good for their children either. As the GDA model prescribes for a 40 year old woman, parents will inevitably overfeed their children. Therefore, it truly puzzles me that the commission rejects parliament's proposal to add a clarification on the GDA reference value.

These examples show that the contribution food labelling can make to tackle childhood obesity is limited. What we can do is provide consumers with basic and legible information and

protect them from misleading advertising. A lot has already been achieved. We have agreed on a clear labelling of the energy content, using comparability of products through a harmonised reference value of 100g/ml and the prohibition of misleading marketing with regard to health claims, food imitations and other characteristics of foodstuffs. As long as parents do not understand the contribution of certain nutrients to the health of their children, more extensive food labelling will have no effect.

The case of the United States is evidence enough. The lack of knowledge and the missing link to the food production in the

urbanised world leaves us no choice but to rely on the skills of experts, who work with young children. Training paediatricians as well as nursery and school teachers is pivotal. When I was a child, domestic science was part of the class schedule. Revitalising that tradition might be another good start to reverse the epidemic of childhood obesity. ★

"As long as parents do not understand the contribution of certain nutrients to the health of their children, more extensive food labelling will have no effect"

Renate Sommer was parliament's rapporteur on the food labelling directive

Weight watchers

Glenis Willmott is calling for restrictions on the advertising of junk food to children



Classified as an epidemic in Europe by the World Health Organisation (WHO), with around 20 per cent of European children overweight, of which one third are obese, it is time for policymakers to turn rhetoric into action.

With high prevalence rates in children from poor socio-economic backgrounds, there is clearly a strong correlation between childhood obesity and disadvantaged families. Of course education is key for health workers, parents and the children themselves. As MEPs we can encourage member states to dedicate sufficient resources to education programmes, and to cooperate together to share best practice and exchange ideas, we have no formal powers in this area. Similarly, public health largely remains a national competence, although increasingly, legislation we deal with in the parliament can and does play an important role.

For example, in order to empower parents to make the right choices for their children, simple and easy to understand nutritional information is important. It is difficult to make the right choices if no information is available, or is presented in an unclear or inaccessible format, obscuring comparisons. This is why the ongoing struggle over the new food information to consumers' regulation is so important to many of us in the European parliament who understand this.

I was delighted that in our first reading vote last June that my proposals to label key nutrients on the front of pack in an easily comparable format were backed by the majority of MEPs. I was less pleased that my proposal to use the traffic light system to denote low, medium or high levels of salt, sugar and fats was rejected, following a fierce and often misleading campaign from vested interests. This system, simple yet effective, would have enabled at a glance comparisons between different foods, helping parents to identify the healthier option for their children.

A similar lobby from vested interests was also at play during the revision of the television without frontiers directive some years ago, when a proposed amendment to restrict advertis-

ing of junk food before 9pm was ferociously opposed. I find it unacceptable that foods with a poor nutritional profile can continue to be advertised to children, be it directly or indirectly and I look forward to the imminent implementation of the nutrition and health claims regulation, adopted by the European parliament in 2006, which will ensure nutrition claims must be scientifically backed up.

It will also put into place nutrient profiles, ending the current practice whereby a food with a particularly poor profile in terms of high levels of fats, sugar and salt is allowed to bear a positive health claim which focuses on just one positive aspect, while ignoring the many negatives.

I was also extremely interested to read about developments in Finland, and their planned confectionary tax to help discourage consumption of unhealthy junk food. While I am not necessarily convinced that this is the best way forward, it does highlight an important issue; it is often the food with the poorest nutritional make-up which is cheapest, meaning that parents wishing to provide their children with a balanced, healthy diet find it more expensive to do so. This is perverse and if we are serious about tackling the child obesity epidemic, we must look at ways of reversing this.

Unfortunately there is no silver bullet to help us tackle the scourge of child obesity and while the measures I have outlined here may be small steps, nevertheless they do represent progress and I shall continue to campaign on such issues in the future. ★

"There is clearly a strong correlation between childhood obesity and disadvantaged families"

Glenis Willmott is a member of parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee

Get moving

Magnús Scheving says that positive health messages can help tackle the problem of childhood obesity

The prevalence of obesity has doubled worldwide since 1980, and childhood obesity is the fastest growing health problem in the west. Rising childhood obesity rates are a direct result of poor nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle, and a serious problem for public health policy with current forecasts suggesting that one in three children will be morbidly obese by 2050 if current trends continue.

What's to be done? The LazyTown children's TV series was conceived and developed by me, 20 years ago, as a vehicle to promote children's health and fitness. It started originally as a book and children's stage show in my home country, Iceland, where I was working as a sports teacher and motivational speaker. The LazyTown stage musical show was seen by every child in Iceland. Instead of sweets, we sold sports candy (fruit and vegetables) as interval snacks, and sales of carrots in the country rocketed as a result.

My aim was to make the health and fitness message fun for preschoolers. Through the TV series, now on air in 128 countries worldwide, the idea of healthy lifestyle choices around food and exercise are promoted, but through engaging stories, in an age-appropriate and fun context – which is essential, and explains why the show is so popular. Our ethos is embodied in the slogan: move your body, move your mind, move the world – everyday. Young children take the healthy messages from the TV series on board, they start asking for sports candy – fruit and vegetables – and wanting to be more active. Parents are delighted, as it helps them help their children to make healthier lifestyle choices.

Throughout the brand's history, we have stayed true to its principles, which is why you won't see a LazyTown logo on a chocolate bar, or a packet of crisps, or bottle of soda. We abide by the LazyTown food promise, which underpins any brand extension or licensing deals that we negotiate when it comes to food products. This is why first lady Michelle Obama invited me, as my LazyTown character superhero Sportacus, to help her launch the Let's Move campaign in the US in March 2010. We have worked in other countries around the world, with government departments and local retailers alike, from the



ministry of health in Portugal promoting their national day against obesity campaign, to attending health summits with British prime minister David Cameron, and from retail deals with Asda UK, to milk producers Lala in Mexico.

The LazyTown food promise has a few simple rules. That food should: be loved by kids; contain controlled levels of fat, salt, sugar and (only if applicable) preservatives; contain no artificial flavours, colours or sweeteners; portions should be appropriately sized and should present a variety of food groups for different eating occasions, and contain fortification only when appropriate.

The role of TV can be exploited productively when it comes to marketing positive health messages to young children, and by extension to their families. But for this to work, the programmes must be fun, otherwise children won't watch. We have the evidence to prove the effectiveness of this approach. Yes, there is legislation already in place to prevent the misuse of product promotion within children's programmes, and while this varies between some of the licensing areas in which we operate, first and foremost we abide by our own ethos and principles. That way, we can be sure of protecting the brand's primary position of being the only children's global entertainment brand dedicated to health – making it a win-win situation all round. ★

"The role of TV can be exploited productively when it comes to marketing positive health messages to young children, and by extension to their families"

Magnús Scheving is creator and co-star of the children's television programme LazyTown

Why weight?

Margherita Caroli outlines her hopes and expectations for the upcoming childhood obesity congress

Childhood obesity experts from across Europe and the globe will gather at the European parliament in Brussels on November 17 for the 20th anniversary of the European childhood obesity group (Ecog). This year's congress is perhaps the most exciting of my career to date. Not only is it the largest gathering of childhood obesity experts in Brussels in recent times, it could also mark a turning point in Europe's approach to this growing public health concern.

Why? Because, ironically we have realised that to effectively take childhood obesity off the menu in Europe, we first need to put it on the menu in Brussels. So we have brought together more than 250 experts to meet with policymakers and the food, advertising and communications industry to look at ways to work together to combat childhood obesity.

The first step is to make childhood obesity a priority at the highest political level. This is why I am delighted that we have secured the participation of European health and consumer affairs commissioner John Dalli and deputy prime minister of Belgium, Laurette Onkelinx, as well as a number of MEPs including Frédérique Ries, Renate Sommer and Paolo de Castro. I look forward to hearing their perspectives and plans for the EU in the coming years, in particular the next phase of the European commission's strategy for nutrition, weight and obesity.

I look forward to welcoming and hearing from officials from a number of key commission directorates including agriculture, research and health on their initiatives to battle the bulge among children. Children's health is a complex machine and must not be tackled in a silo. The European institutions need to look at all policies and initiatives on weight and obesity in children with more synergy, starting with the common agricultural policy (CAP); this is why we have invited Paolo de Castro who is interested in the link between agriculture and public health. I hope, for example to see a clear reference to health in the commission's communication on CAP post-2013, also due out this month.

We will be joined at the congress by representatives from the food industry. Many of my colleagues have traditionally taken the David and Goliath approach to industry, but times

have changed and many forward-looking organisations are working with the scientific community to improve approaches and products and to monitor the impact of programmes and schemes. I would personally like to see more done on issues such as marketing and advertising. For example, it still surprises me that the food industry can use sporting personalities to 'sell' the idea that certain products can make you perform better physically, making you a "champion", without this being scientifically proven. My colleagues and I would like to work with policymakers and the industry to find new and alternative ways forward in this regard.

Finally, for the first time Ecog will focus on communication. It is time for us to think about how this new generation of children and parents relate and respond to information on health. We live in a multi-platform communication environment and families take their information from a broad range of media. The congress will welcome some of Europe's leading experts on communication and we look forward to learning from them so we can take out our own communication efforts on healthy lifestyles to a new level.

When I first became a paediatrician in 1981, it was a very rare case to see an obese child. Today, I see more than 10 obese children a week, who are younger and heavier than those rare cases I saw 29 years ago.

According to the international convention on the rights of the child, children must have the right to adequate food and the right to the highest attainable standard of health. We need to ensure that this is happening across Europe by making sure that childhood obesity is taken off the menu. ★

Margherita Caroli is president of the European childhood obesity group

"Children's health is a complex machine and must not be tackled in a silo"

