

## **Medical Officer of Health Report September 2015**

### **Sugary Drinks, Health and Individual Responsibility**

This is the third in a series of three Medical Officer of Health reports to CPHAC on the topic of childhood obesity prevention. I see these reports as an important opportunity to provide independent, professional commentary and opinion on obesity, the issue that is considered to become the leading preventable cause of health loss in New Zealand, overtaking the impact of tobacco smoking, by 2016.

New Zealanders consume, on average, 37 teaspoons of sugar per day. The World Health Organisation guidelines published this year indicate that, ideally, adults should consume less than about six teaspoons of sugar per day, and children less than about three to four teaspoons per day. We seem to have a 'sugar epidemic' with high levels of added sugar found in everything from breakfast cereals, to muesli bars, to tomato sauce. In particular, sugary drinks (also known as sugar-sweetened beverages or SSBs) are recognised as a significant contributor to the amount of sugar we consume – and a likely important contributor to childhood obesity. A single 355mL can of fizzy drink may contain nine teaspoons of sugar, and a 600mL bottle approximately sixteen teaspoons of sugar.

Over the last several years, it has been increasingly recognised that to start preventing childhood obesity we need to focus on changing the food environment and within this an important starting place and where much of our initial effort should go is in reducing the consumption of SSBs. Currently, there are important initiatives taking shape across the Bay of Plenty and Lakes area with, for example, workplaces adopting healthy food and beverage guidelines and some primary schools implementing 'water and milk' only policies. Of note is the Ministry of Health directive to all District Health Boards (DHBs) (*20 August 2015*) to remove SSBs from sale on their premises – an action that both Bay of Plenty and Lakes DHBs have already advanced.

However, very often discussion on addressing the health risks of SSB consumption shifts to the concept of individual responsibility, or in the case of children's health this individual responsibility also includes parental responsibility. The result is often one of blaming the individual or their parents for unhealthy dietary habits or adverse health outcomes. I think this apparently default position of blaming the individual is an intriguing concept, not only because it exonerates significant sectors of society from any real responsibility or meaningful action, but also because I have come to the conclusion that much of what we think of as individual responsibility and individual choice is, in reality, rather elusive and difficult to achieve. There is definitely an important role for individual and parental responsibility. However for these to be meaningful and practical concepts there need to be significant enabling changes, especially to the labelling, marketing, promotion and availability of these products.

#### **Sugar labelling using teaspoon measures**

Useful and understandable product labelling seems to me to be an important and basic starting point to underpin the notion of informed personal choice. When it comes to SSBs (and for that matter other products typically high in sugar such as breakfast cereals) I don't think any of our current or proposed labelling systems are adequate. In fact, I think most consumers and parents find that the labelling showing sugar content of SSBs can be quite obscure and difficult to interpret. Ingredient lists may use synonyms for sugar (eg sucrose)

and various sugar product names (eg high fructose corn syrup). Where sugar content is required to be listed in the nutritional information this is typically given as the amount of sugar in grams per 100 mL or grams in some serving size. For the vast majority of us this is not meaningful information as we find it difficult to visualise a gram of sugar and even more challenging to visualise how much would then be in the product in total.

However, most of us can readily imagine a teaspoon of sugar and, for example, form an opinion as to the desirability of consuming nine teaspoons of sugar in one sugary drink. Surely for the market to work, consumers need good information to make informed choices about products? If there is clear labelling of a SSB product that clearly shows how many teaspoons of sugar are in the product, I think we will be closer to individual responsibility and personal choice becoming more meaningful concepts. Given the current and future impacts of obesity and diabetes on the health sector there is clearly a role for the health sector to advocate for, and support, this type of very explicit product labelling.

### **Health warnings on SSB products and advertising**

While on the subject of product labelling, and in the interests of supporting individual responsibility through fully-informed consumer choices, labelling requirements need to go one step further with the inclusion of health warnings on SSB products and advertising.

Along with the well-known risk of dental decay, there is now a compelling body of evidence that regular consumption of SSBs is a significant contributor to the risk of developing type 2 diabetes as well as the risk of becoming obese. While there may be many ways to consume excess calories, SSBs provide calories which do not as readily make one feel full and so are more easily consumed in excess. The fructose component of the sugar has been associated with the risk of metabolic syndrome, insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. Over the last few decades there has been a trend of increasing consumption of SSBs globally and in New Zealand. It seems likely that SSBs are an important contributor to our obesity epidemic and to the observed increasing rates of type 2 diabetes. Moreover SSBs typically don't provide any beneficial nutrients apart from their calorie content. So when taking all these considerations together there is a strong argument that SSBs should not be seen as a normal product or 'good' and should be required to display a health warning that supports individuals and parents to make fully-informed purchase decisions.

This year the city of San Francisco has taken a global lead on this issue with the requirement that all SSB advertising in the city area, such as on billboards, includes a health warning stating that: "*Drinking beverages with added sugar(s) contributes to obesity, diabetes and tooth decay*". In addition, advertising of sugary drinks on publicly-owned property has been prohibited. According to media reports, the American Beverage Association has responded by suing the city council based on the argument that these measures are unconstitutional. Although I am no legal expert, this seems to be shaping up as a conflict between individual rights and corporate rights. As a public health practitioner I would argue that consumers and parents have a right to know that there is a body of evidence that shows that consuming one or more SSBs per day increases the risk of obesity by 50% and the risk of diabetes by about 25%. What the science is currently saying about the health risks of regular sugary drink consumption is important information to enable and inform personal choice and affirm the rights of children to be healthy – as such it is information that should not be suppressed or subordinate to corporate interests.

### **Marketing to children**

In a recent media interview on the topic I suggested that SSBs are aggressively marketed. In the media article (Bay of Plenty Times, 7 June 2015) the journalist included comment from the executive director of the New Zealand Beverage Council who "*refuted claims the industry was aggressively marketing to children*". I guess what comprises 'aggressive marketing' is largely a matter of opinion. I also imagine that most parents who have tried to reduce or limit their children's sugar intake will not need any convincing on this issue. However, those who need more information to form an opinion on whether or not SSBs are aggressively marketed to children, at least from a global perspective, may want to review Coca-Cola's 2020 vision published on their website. This publicly available document tells us that:

- Coca-Cola aims to more than double their servings to over 3 billion per day
- Coca-Cola's stated priorities include the need to "*act now to ensure the next generation of youth falls in love with Coca-Cola.*"

There is a place for restricting marketing of unhealthy products, such as SSBs, to children. It is well recognised that young children are not able to, or have difficulty, distinguishing marketing from reality and so may not recognise marketing as a persuasive technique to sell a product. It stands to reason then that children should have the right to grow up in an environment free of undue influence from the beverage industry and from the marketing of unhealthy products, such as SSBs.

Personally, I think that even as adults we do not always perceive an idea to be a marketing construct – and perhaps this is the hallmark of successful and sophisticated marketing. For example, while we may perceive the kids meal at a fast food outfit as a marketing ploy, the whole idea of 'kids food' seems to have become pervasive in our culture, and surely a construct of the food industry. The vast majority of what is considered kids food seems unhealthy with typically high levels of sugar, salt and fat (eg chicken nuggets, fries, tomato sauce and a fizzy drink). It is concerning that lifelong taste preferences for this type of food (that is, highly processed food high in sugar, salt and fat) may become entrenched and so contribute in the long term to health conditions related to this type of diet. I think we should be inspired by the French approach to school lunches that does not accept that children need to eat 'kids food' but instead aims to instil a love of a wide variety of healthy and wholesome foods. It is about life-long habits and taste preferences that are formed in childhood. Wouldn't it be good if we can "*act now to ensure the next generation of youth falls in love with*", and so develops a life-long taste preference for, healthy and wholesome foods?

### **Restricting availability**

I find the amount of aisle space and number of end of aisle displays dedicated to SSBs at supermarkets remarkable. It would be interesting to know how this sales and marketing space has grown over recent decades and how the SSB product range has grown with the addition of, for example, various energy drinks, sports drinks, flavoured waters and so on.

Another phenomenon has been the apparent proliferation of convenience and corner stores that seem to sell mostly SSBs, other high sugar products and snack products. These stores often seem to be in close vicinity to schools and seem to be especially good at selling sugary products and SSBs to school students.

Schools can help by limiting the availability of SSBs for sale on their premises but when school students are surrounded by stores such as these as well as a plethora of fast food outlets all selling SSBs and often SSB/meal deals, it is difficult to argue that it's simply a matter of individual choice and individual responsibility. Without a doubt, the cards are heavily stacked against responsible parenting.

### **SSB tax**

So with an unhealthy product implicated in significantly contributing to the risk of obesity, diabetes and a number of long term conditions, there seems to be evidence of market failure, with the health system and tax payer unfairly bearing the negative externalities in terms of additional healthcare and lost productivity costs. Much of this failure may be due to consumers not having useful information to make rational choices about products and health risk, some may be related to what some commentators suggest are addictive properties of sugar, and some may be due to a lack of a price signal that reflects the externality costs.

Preventing obesity, and especially preventing childhood obesity with all its long-term health risks and costs, is possibly the most important public health challenge of our time. It is reasonable then for serious consideration to be given to an SSB tax that not only helps correct this market failure but that also helps provide the additional revenue needed for prevention programmes and healthcare costs.

In conclusion, the individual choice and personal responsibility paradigm is what we have had for the last 30 years while the obesity epidemic has been gathering momentum. This is in itself good evidence that this approach is failing. Part of the reason for this failure is that personal and parental choice and responsibility are rather elusive and to a large extent unrealistic concepts in the current environment. There is definitely a role for individual choice and personal responsibility but addressing the obesity epidemic, and the contributing role of SSBs to this epidemic, requires leadership, courage and action across the marketing, retail, tax and regulatory environment. When this has been achieved, individual choice and personal (and parental) responsibility may become a more meaningful and achievable reality.

[More information:](#)

[For commentary on school lunches in France:](#)

<http://karenlebillon.com/french-school-lunch-menus/>

[For Coca-Cola's 2020 vision:](#)

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