A tax on sugary drinks

House of Lords
Wednesday 13\textsuperscript{th} January 2016

Introduction

The British Medical Association (BMA) is a voluntary professional association and independent trade union which represents doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine all over the UK, including public health doctors. With a membership of over 160,000 worldwide, we promote the medical and allied sciences, seek to maintain the honour and interests of the medical profession and promote the achievement of high quality healthcare.

In July 2015, the BMA published a new report, ‘Food for thought: promoting healthy diets among children and young people\textsuperscript{1}, which highlighted the need for wide-ranging action to promote healthier diets, particularly among children and young people. One of the report’s key recommendations was the introduction of a 20 per cent tax on sugar-sweetened beverages\textsuperscript{2}.

Key points

• The BMA is deeply concerned about the impact of poor diet on the public’s health, which is responsible for up to 70,000 deaths a year, and has the most significant impact on the NHS budget, costing £6bn a year.
• The intake of added sugars by many children and adults in the UK far exceeds recommended levels. Sugar-sweetened beverages are a major source of added sugars and are typically high in calories and low in essential vitamins and minerals.
• The BMA believes that the introduction of a tax on all sugar-sweetened beverages, which increases the price by at least 20 per cent, could reduce the prevalence of obesity in the UK by around 180,000.
• Public Health England also recommends the introduction of a minimum 10-20\% on high sugar products through the use of a tax or levy such as on full sugar soft drinks\textsuperscript{3}.
• Funds raised by the introduction of a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages could subsidise the sale of fruit and vegetables, and help tackle the increasing level of obesity and diet-related health problems in the UK.
• A sugar tax is just one of a range of interventions needed to promote healthier diets among children and young people. The BMA believes a strong regulatory framework should be central to the approach to reducing the burden of diet-related ill health in the UK, which focuses on interventions that limit commercial influences on people’s dietary behaviour and encourage health dietary patterns.

BMA support for a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages

The BMA is deeply concerned that the intake of added sugars by many children and adults in the UK far exceeds recommended levels\textsuperscript{4}, and there is increasing concern about their role in the development of a range of health conditions.
Sugar-sweetened beverages are a significant source of added sugars – for example, many leading brands of sugar-sweetened beverages have been found to contain nine or more teaspoons of sugar in a 330ml serving\(^5\). In 2008/09, in the UK, beverages accounted for 21 per cent of energy consumed by children (aged 1.5 to 18 years) per day, this is particularly concerning as adults (19 to 64 years) consumed less at 18 per cent per day\(^6\) in the same period. Since the 1990s, there has been a significant shift from the high-fat milk towards sodas, fruit drinks, juices and sweetened dairy – particularly among pre-schoolers (children not yet old enough for school or attending a preschool), children and adolescents\(^7\). This is a serious cause for concern.

While introducing a wide range of taxation on products is an important long-term goal, the BMA believes a useful first step would be to implement a duty on sugar-sweetened beverages, which would increase the price by at least 20 per cent. There is strong evidence to show that taxing sugar-sweetened beverages would be effective because:

- these are typically high in calories and low in essential vitamins and minerals (often referred to as ‘empty calories’)
- the intake of added sugars by many children and adults in the UK far exceeds recommended levels
- a high intake of added sugars is a risk factor for a range of health conditions.

Evidence consistently concludes that taxation can improve health, with suggestions that relatively high taxation levels (in the region of 20 per cent) are needed to achieve detectable changes in consumption, body weight and disease occurrence\(^8\) \(^9\) \(^10\). A 2013 modelling study found that a 20 per cent tax on sugar-sweetened drinks would reduce the prevalence of obesity in the UK by 1.3 per cent (around 180,000 people)\(^11\).

**Public Health England**

In October 2015, Public Health England published its long awaited report, ‘Sugar reduction: the evidence for action’\(^12\). The report concluded that a range of factors, including marketing, promotions and advertising, was contributing to an increase in sugar consumption. PHE stated that a broad range of measures was needed to respond to reduce levels of sugar consumption, including a tax on high sugar products.

Referring to evidence from both stakeholders and current research studies, one of the key recommendations made in the PHE report was the ‘introduction of a price increase of a minimum of 10-20 per cent on high sugar products through the use of a tax or a levy such as on full sugar soft drinks’.

The BMA notes that a sugar tax is just one lever for change being recommended by PHE, who has also called for a ‘broad and balanced approach’ to reducing sugar consumption levels. This correlates with the BMA’s call for a range of interventions and comprehensive action to promote healthier diets among children and young people.

**Subsidisation to promote consumption of healthier products**

The UK population, particularly low income households, are not consuming enough fruit and vegetables. We believe financial measures, such as subsidisation, should be considered as a means of encouraging consumption of healthier products, and may alleviate the regressive nature of food taxes and reduce diet-related disease. Fruit and vegetables are one of the food groups most affected by recent food price rises and the BMA believes consideration should,
therefore, be given to the introduction of fiscal measures to subsidise the sale of fruit and vegetables in the UK, which could be funded by the introduction of a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. We believe this could be an important mechanism to help redress the imbalance highlighted previously between the cost of healthy and unhealthy products, which particularly impacts on individuals and families affected by food poverty.

Interventions to promote healthier diets

Comprehensive action is needed to promote healthier diets among children and young people to reduce the substantial burden of diet-related ill health in the UK as well as improving health outcomes. These range from those which govern the supply of food and drink products to policies seeking to modify the demand for specific types of product. The BMA believes it is essential to tackle the environmental influences that have created a social norm of unhealthy behaviour in the UK including the wide availability, promotion and affordability of unhealthy food and drink products.

We propose a number of interventions to promote healthier diets in our ‘Food for thought’ report including 13 that:

- regulations should be developed to prohibit the marketing of unhealthy food and drink products to children and young people
- local authorities should be provided with the power to restrict the future number, clustering and concentration of fast-food outlets locally
- legislation should be introduced in England to ensure that mandatory school food standards apply to all academy schools and free schools
- a one-year target should be set for manufacturers, retailers and caterers to not produce or sell any food and drink products containing artificial trans fats in the UK. Regulatory measures should be implemented if this target is not met.

For further information, please contact:

Susan Bahl, Senior Public Affairs Adviser
T: 020 3058 7457 | M: 07919 228 506 | E sbahl@bma.org.uk

January 2016

---

1 BMA ‘Food for thought: promoting healthy diets among children and young people’ (July 2015)
2 All non-alcoholic water based beverages with added sugar, including sugar-sweetened soft drinks, energy drinks, fruit drink, sports drinks and fruit-juice concentrates.
13 BMA ‘Food for thought: promoting healthy diets among children and young people’ (July 2015)