Dear Lorna

Soft Drinks Industry Levy

The BMA (British Medical Association) is an apolitical professional association and independent trade union, representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care. We have a membership of over 170,000, which continues to grow every year.

The Association welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation as we are extremely concerned about the impact of obesity in the UK. It is particularly worrying that nearly a third of British children at age 10-11 are obese or overweight, which will have long-term effects on their health and wellbeing. Our members routinely face the challenge of managing patients with obesity, which significantly impacts on the demand for NHS resources.

We therefore strongly support this levy, as the use of taxation measures on unhealthy food and drink products has consistently been found to have the potential to reduce obesity and improve health. While taxing a wide range of such products is an important long-term goal, introducing a soft drinks industry levy is a welcome first step. This is consistent with research that the strongest evidence of effectiveness of taxation approaches is from studies of sugar-sweetened beverages, and that these products are typically high in calories and low in essential vitamins and minerals (often referred to as ‘empty calories’). We believe this to be an important measure in reducing the intake of added sugars which are overconsumed by the majority of children and adults in the UK. It is also worth noting that households with children in the UK purchase around 50% more of their added sugar from carbonated and non-carbonated soft drinks, compared to households without children.

The BMA does not have a view on the majority of the questions in this consultation given their technical nature; however, we are a member of the Obesity Health Alliance, which will be submitting a more detailed response. Our views on what should be within the scope of the levy are as follows.
We agree that the definition of added sugar should be based on the definition of ‘free sugars’ used by the Scientific Advisory Group on Nutrition and the WHO (World Health Organization). We also broadly agree that the Fruit Juices and Fruit Nectars (England) Regulations 2013 should be exempted from the levy, as these fruit juices can form part of a person’s fruit and vegetable consumption. There must be close monitoring to identify any unintended consequences of excluding fruit juices from the levy such as producers excessively promoting and consumers drinking excessive fruit juice, or pure fruit products being used to sweeten soft drinks.

However, we do support a levy on fruit-juice concentrate or fruit drinks that have a high level of added sugar (containing 5g/100ml or more), as these drinks do not contain the same level of vitamins and minerals as fruit juice. Similarly, we agree that dilutable liquids such as cordials, squash and syrups should be subject to the levy, where the diluted drinks contains 5g/100ml of sugar or more, based on their recommended dilution ratio. There must be ongoing monitoring of these drinks, to ensure that consumers do not compensate for the sugar reduction by increasing the volume of concentrate. We believe that liquid drinks flavourings should also be subject to the levy, and that their inclusion should have their own thresholds.

We believe that the 75% milk threshold for milk-based drinks is too low. We believe that only milk-based drinks with under 5% added sugar (including water-based plant milk with added sugar) should be exempt from the levy. The benefits of dairy products can be obtained through dairy products such as yoghurt and milk that do not contain any added sugar. Furthermore, reforming milk-based drinks to reduce the levels of added sugar should be an easier process than it is for fruit juices.

While the evidence on the health impact of using artificial sweeteners is inconclusive, and it is unclear what extent the levy will lead to an increase in their intake through reformulated products, we believe this aspect should be kept under review in the monitoring PHE are going to be doing on the impact of the levy.

We hope that our submission is useful – please do not hesitate to contact us for more information if required.

Yours sincerely

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