Childhood obesity strategy

House of Commons, Backbench Business debate
Thursday 21st 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 170,000 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.

Doctors are increasingly concerned about the impact of obesity on their patients and NHS resources. The BMA has long campaigned for measures to reduce levels of obesity, including action targeted at improving children’s diets, and increasing active travel and physical activity levels. We believe there has been an over-reliance on personal responsibility and educational approaches, which fail to recognise the need for a range of interventions to support and promote behaviour change, including some regulatory approaches, which will require action by Government.

We are concerned by the ongoing delays in the publication of the Government’s obesity strategy and ask that it be released as soon as possible.

Key points
- Doctors are 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.
- A comprehensive, cross-government strategy that supports and sustains healthy diets and physical activity is urgently required. The strategy should include a range of interventions, including a tax on all sugar-sweetened beverages, which increases the price by at least 20 per cent and the introduction of UK wide targets, to be achieved by 2020, to reduce calorie, fat, saturated fat and added sugar levels across a range of products.
- 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.
- It is also essential that the obesity strategy includes interventions to support physical activity and active travel.

Obesity: key facts and figures
- Obesity increases the risk of a range of chronic conditions including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and some cancers.
Adult population obesity statistics\(^1\):
- 26 per cent of men and 24 per cent of women in England
- 24 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women in Northern Ireland
- 25 per cent of men and 29 per cent of women in Scotland
- 22 per cent of men and 23 per cent of women in Wales

Childhood obesity statistics - for children aged 2-15:
- 16 per cent for boys and 15 per cent for girls in England
- 10 per cent for boys and girls in Northern Ireland
- 17 per cent for boys and 15 per cent for girls in Scotland
- 20 per cent for boys and 19 per cent for girls in Wales

**Interventions to promote healthier diets**

In July 2015, the BMA published a new report, ‘*Food for thought: promoting healthy diets among children and young people*’\(^2\), which highlighted the need for wide-ranging action to promote healthier diets, particularly among children and young people.

We believe 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. Doctors believe 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:
- the use of fiscal measures that favour healthy diets, including introducing a tax on all sugar-sweetened beverages, which increases the price by at least 20%; and subsidising the sale of fruit and vegetables.
- measures to improve attitudes and knowledge, including high-impact and sustained social marketing campaigns; wider implementation of the whole-school approach for promoting healthier diets; and a mandatory, traffic-light labelling scheme
- regulating the nutritional content of processed food and drink products by setting UK-wide targets, to be achieved by 2020, for manufacturers, retailers and caterers to reduce calorie, fat, saturated fat and added sugar levels across a range of product categories
- regulating industry practices, including ensuring sales promotions favour healthy options; and restricting the display and promotion of unhealthy food and drink products at checkouts and in queuing areas
- limiting unhealthy promotions, including prohibiting marketing communications that appeal to children and young people;
- preventing marketing of unhealthy food and drink products in schools;
- ensuring mandatory school food standards apply to all academy schools and free schools and extending the provision of free fruit and vegetable schemes
- promoting healthy dietary behaviour, including giving local authorities powers to restrict the future number, clustering and concentration of fast-food outlets locally;
Supporting physical activity and active travel
As well as taking action to promote healthier diets, it is essential that the forthcoming obesity strategy also covers physical activity and active travel. In a previous BMA report ‘Healthy transport = healthy lives’, we proposed a number of interventions to support this, including:

- increase and protect access to recreational facilities (eg public swimming pools and playing fields) regardless of socio-economic status and level of physical and psychological ability
- ambitious growth targets for walking and cycling, with increased funding and resources, including the provision of a comprehensive network of routes for walking and cycling
- prioritise active and sustainable forms of transport in planning decisions to ensure local facilities and services are easily and safely accessible on foot, by bicycle and by other modes of transport involving physical activity
- measures to reduce congestion and improving usability of roads by pedestrians and cyclists through reallocation of road space, restricting motor vehicle access, road-user charging schemes, and traffic-calming and traffic management (including area-wide 20 miles per hour speed limits).

The Obesity Health Alliance
The BMA is a member of the Obesity Health Alliance (OHA), which is an alliance of 27 national organisations which joined forces to share a wealth of experience and knowledge on obesity prevention and management in all age groups. We are committed to working with the Government to tackle the complex issue of overweight and obesity in the UK.

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

1 BMA ‘Obesity: Facts and figures’
2 BMA ‘Food for thought: promoting healthy diets among children and young people’ (July 2015)
3 BMA ‘Healthy transport = healthy lives’ (2012)