

US blocks UN proposal to combat obesity

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Obesity is one of the major causes of non-communicable disease. Worldwide there are around 300 million obese people with another 750 million considered overweight—approximately one sixth of the world's population. In May 2002 the World Health Organisation was mandated to prepare a report on the virtual “epidemic” of obesity that is concerning health workers around the world.

The report is to be presented to the World Health Assembly meeting in May 2004, and a draft version, *WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health*, was published last November. Independent international experts on diet and physical activity contributed to the report, which concluded that “a profound shift in the balance of the major causes of death and disease is underway in most countries. Globally, the burden of non-communicable diseases has rapidly increased.”

It points out that for the year 2001 non-communicable disease accounted for 60 percent of the 56 million deaths worldwide and 47 percent of the “global burden of disease”. It insisted that, apart from tobacco consumption, “high levels of cholesterol in the blood, low intake of fruit and vegetables, being overweight (and) physical inactivity” are among the leading factors in the increase in non-communicable diseases.

“For all countries, current evidence suggests that the underlying determinants of non-communicable diseases are largely the same. These include increased consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt; reduced levels of physical activity ... Of particular concern are the increasingly unhealthy diets and reduced physical activity of children and adolescents.”

The report advocates a global strategy to improve diet, calling for initiatives to be undertaken “by the food industry to modify the fat, sugar and salt content of processed foods and to review many current

marketing practices ... [so as to] accelerate health gains worldwide.”

It calls for a cut in the intake of fats in general and to shift towards unsaturated fat, a cut in the consumption of salt and of refined sugars as additives and the encouragement of consumption of healthy alternatives such as fruit, vegetables, legumes, whole grains and nuts.

It calls on food manufacturers to “limit the levels of saturated fats and trans-fatty acids, sugar and salt in existing products” and to “follow responsible marketing practices that support the strategy, particularly with regard to the promotion and marketing of foods high in saturated fats, sugar or salt, especially to young children”.

The report, when finally agreed will be advisory only, making “recommendations” to the giant food manufacturers and calling for them to carry out “initiatives”. It will have no power to impose any of its conclusions on these mighty corporations.

But the food industry is not prepared to allow even a whiff of criticism to be aired against its activities. As soon as the draft report was published, the Grocery Manufacturers of America (GMA), which represents corporations such as Birds Eye, Coca-Cola, Del Monte and Heinz, lobbied the Bush administration to act on their behalf and attack its findings.

A letter was dispatched to the United Nations from William Steiger, a special assistant in the US Department of Health and Human Services, raising the US government's objections. The letter called into question the whole scientific basis of the WHO report. It denied the role of manufacturers in creating the demand for unhealthy foods, especially by targeting food advertising at children, and took exception to the singling out of particular foods such as those containing high levels of fat, salt and sugar.

Steiger wrote that the US government, “promotes the

view that all foods can be part of a healthy and balanced diet, and supports personal responsibility to choose a diet conducive to individual energy balance, weight control and health.”

He criticised the WHO report for not stressing the responsibility of the every individual to balance his or her diet for themselves. A GMA spokesman commented, “One of the things we didn’t see in the document was a recognition that it ultimately comes down to what individuals choose to do. You can’t solve the problem by government fiat.”

Consumer groups all over the world have denounced the efforts of the US government to undermine the WHO document. The cynical attempt of the food manufacturers to mislead consumers had already been highlighted in a report submitted last year to the WHO consultation on diet and health. A report from the International Association of Consumer Food Organisations (IACFO), entitled *Broadcasting bad health*, contains a section on “How Companies skew the science”. In it they explain how food companies deride the evidence linking diet and bad health and seek to present their products in the best possible light.

They explain that in 1978 Heinz, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, General Foods, Kraft and Procter & Gamble established the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI). It cites one ILSI publication which makes the extraordinary claim that “intake of sugars is inversely associated with the prevalence of obesity” and calls for research to be conducted on how glucose plays a role in “facilitating mental processes”.

Over the past few decades levels of obesity have increased dramatically in America. In his book *Fast Food Nation: What the All-American Meal is Doing to the World*, Eric Schlosser points out that this increase has coincided with the growth of fast food outlets. According to Schlosser today around half of adults and a quarter of children in America are overweight or obese. The spreading of US style fast food outlets throughout the world has gone hand in hand with the increase in obesity. He states, “The obesity epidemic that began in the United States during the late 1970s is now spreading to the rest of the world, with fast food as one of its vectors. Between 1984 and 1993, the number of fast food restaurants in Great Britain roughly doubled—and so did the obesity rate among adults.”

The way fast food is engineered makes its

consumption a hard habit to break. Schlosser notes that a European Union (EU) survey showed that 95 percent of all food adverts directed at children within the EU, were for foods high in salt, fat and sugar content. Last year researchers in the US produced studies showing that rats fed on foods high in salt, sugar or fat became addicted to such foods and manifested withdrawal symptoms when weaned off them. Dr Ann Kelley, a neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin Medical School, said that the changes in the chemistry of the rats brains fed on such foods were similar to the changes associated with prolonged use of morphine or heroin.

Figures produced in the *State of the World Report 2004* published by the World Watch Institute, a US environmental pressure group, gives a glimpse of the global domination of some of the big food companies. It states that McDonald’s served 46 million people a day in 2002 and its total revenue was \$15.4 billion. Coca-Cola’s revenue for the same year was \$19.6 billion.

In his *Annual Report for 2002* the Chief Medical Officer for England likened the increase in child obesity levels to a “health time bomb”, with obesity in six-year-olds doubling and in 15-year-olds trebling over the last 10 years.



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