

British obesity levels the highest in Europe

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Two recent reports show the rapidly increasing levels of obesity in Britain. The Foresight project's "Tackling Obesities: Future Choices" notes that the level of obesity in Britain has doubled over the last 25 years, with around a quarter of adults now obese.

Currently, around 10 percent of children are obese and a further 20 percent plus are overweight. The report's projection for the future based on current trends is that by the year 2025, around 40 percent of the population will be classed as obese. For the year 2050, they predict 60 percent of men, 50 percent of women, half of primary school boys and a fifth of primary school girls will be obese. The cost to the health service of dealing with obesity will be seven times the current costs by 2050, and the wider cost to society will be around £45 billion.

The British government is fully aware of the gravity of the situation. Foresight is based in the Government Office for Science and describes itself as "A high-level stakeholder group, comprising senior decision-makers and budget-holders from relevant [Government] Departments, Research Councils and other organisations." It acts as a think tank producing reports and information to advise the government, and its director is Sir David King, the government's chief scientific adviser.

A second report, "The Health Profile of England 2007," was published in October by the Department of Health. It shows amongst other things the north/south split in health, with worse outcomes in the north roughly correlating to the wealth divide. More people report their health to be "poor" compared to when Labour came to power in 1997. The death rates for chronic liver disease and cirrhosis have increased since that time.

The profile compares health in England with that in the rest of Europe. England has the highest rate of teenage pregnancies. The report confirms child obesity

is on the rise, and that with a quarter of adults obese, England tops the European obesity charts. The rate of obesity is around twice that of Germany and two and half times that of France.

The government responded to the damning figures on obesity by dropping its previous target to eradicate childhood obesity by the year 2010 and instead making the year 2020 the target date.

The Foresight report's conclusion is a bland nebulous one, stating, "Tackling obesity is fundamentally an issue about healthy and sustainable living for current and future generations. This is only likely to be achieved if there is a paradigm shift in thinking, not just by government but by individuals, families, business and society as a whole."

Sir David King commented, "Stocking up on food was key to survival in prehistoric times, but now with energy dense, cheap foods, labour-saving devices, motorised transport and sedentary work, obesity is rapidly becoming a consequence of modern life."

This attempt to shift responsibility away from the government was attacked by health experts. Peter Hollins, chief executive of the British Heart Foundation, said, "Repeated reports like this, which should have had alarm bells ringing in Whitehall long ago, have been met only by repeated pushes of the government's snooze button. Combating childhood obesity was part of New Labour's election manifesto in 1997."

A pamphlet, "Missing the Target," put out by the Children's Food Campaign in October, notes that "the obesity crisis has become the nation's most pressing public health problem...the Government has not yet taken the steps necessary to improve children's diets."

The foreword to the pamphlet makes the point: "This is the first generation of children predicted to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents because their lives are cut short by the consequences of obesity."

A contribution to the pamphlet by the National Obesity Forum states, “The current projection that there will be one million obese children by 2010 is an utter disgrace. The major flaw in dealing with obesity so far is the government has concentrated more on cure than prevention. They must begin looking at halting obesity among pre-school children as a priority.”

The National Obesity Forum gives details from the Health Survey for England 1995 to 2004, which showed that “over a 10 year period, obesity in children aged two to 15 nearly doubled, from 11 percent to 19 percent in boys and 12 percent to 18 percent in girls...the proportion of younger children aged two to 10 classified as either overweight or obese rose to 28 percent, while for older children in rose to 40 percent.”

The forum also notes a survey showing that 77 percent of children who become overweight remain obese as adults. One serious consequence of childhood obesity is the onset of type 2 diabetes—diabetes associated with being overweight, as opposed to being hereditary. At one time, it was only found in adults, but is now being found in children. They also point out the correlation between poverty and obesity, with poorer children more likely to be obese.

The link between obesity and other diseases is brought out in two contributions to the pamphlet that show the increased risks of heart attacks, strokes and even cancer are related to obesity.

“Missing the Target” also brings out the role unhealthy “energy dense” food plays in obesity. Dr. Becky Lang of the Association for the Study of Obesity notes: “Data from highly controlled studies have shown energy dense foods increase energy intake. In real life, energy dense foods tend to be high in fat, often high in added sugars too, with a low fruit and/or vegetable content... This epitomises much of the fast food on offer in every high street...We need to recognise that the food environment in Britain today is tipped heavily in favour of over-consumption. Energy dense foods and large portions offer the cheapest cost/calorie option and they are heavily marketed... This may exacerbate existing health inequalities.”

The pamphlet also notes a Medical Research Council report showing that “the UK distribution of McDonald’s outlets correlates precisely with disadvantage.”

Dr. Vivienne Nathanson, of the British Medical

Association, highlights the role of advertising, particularly TV advertising, in promoting “junk” food. The government acknowledged that many adverts for food high in saturated fat, salt and sugar are directed towards children. After discussions with Ofcom, the communications industry regulator, there has been a restriction of adverts for such foods on programmes directed at children. However, the restriction does not apply to many programmes that children actually watch.

A press release put out by the consumer group *Which?* in June of this year revealed that only 7 out of the top 50 popular TV programmes seen by children will be covered by the advertising restriction. A spokesperson said, “The new controls will clearly fail children as none of the programmes with the heaviest viewing figures for 14 to 15 year olds are covered. This leaves the food companies free to broadcast adverts for foods high in fat, salt and sugar at the times when they know the most children will be watching.”

The ability of children to exercise is also under attack. Crowded school curriculums have reduced sport and exercise periods. “Missing the Target” notes: “The National Playing Fields Association is still seriously concerned about a decline in the number of safe areas for children to play.” Most playing fields have been lost to house building, having been sold off to developers. A press release issued by the association in May stated: “Since 2000 the number of planning applications for development on community playing fields has increased by 103 percent. Thousands of sites, both large and small, for formal and informal activity have been lost in that time.”

Despite acknowledging the growing crisis and the devastating impact on children’s health, the Brown government is refusing to direct resources to what is a major public health issue or to take any action that would damage the huge profits of the food industry.



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