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THE PRINCE OF WALES
INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS
LEADERS FORUM

OBESITY

Challenges and Implications for Europe

Produced by Weber Shandwick

Foreword

Obesity is as great a threat to global health as malnutrition. The situation is so serious that if nothing is done about it, our children are likely to die before we do. I believe that we have reached a fork in the road and if I look forward 20 years, we could be faced with one of two scenarios.

On the one hand, there is the “**more of the same**” scenario. We continue with an uncoordinated approach to addressing the challenge of obesity, with some governments introducing “fat” taxes, others banning food advertisements to children, and many introducing education programmes that are weak or ineffective. Physical activity, both in and out of school, continues to decline and companies, under fire from all sides, mount defensive positions rather than engaging with other stakeholders.

The outcome? Under this scenario, obesity levels would continue to rise, which would prove dire for the health of both companies and consumers over the coming decades.

By contrast, the “**committed to act**” scenario involves all parties accepting a shared responsibility to tackle obesity. By identifying the incentives for change and using penalties sparingly, we might see companies working more with their stakeholders to promote healthy food choices, encourage physical activity, label their products clearly and market them responsibly. Perhaps we would then see well-informed children and adults undertaking higher levels of physical activity both at school and at work, eating snacks that are richer in micronutrients and lower in salt, fat and sugar, and buying foods that are labelled in a simple, clear way whether in restaurants or on supermarket shelves.

In the face of such changes, I believe obesity levels would decline, followed by a decline in cardiovascular deaths and diabetes and an increase in life-expectancy, at all levels of society. All of this is possible and could be achieved, but only if we start a new dialogue that focuses on health outcomes, not on dogma or process.

Dr. Derek Yach

Representative of the Director General, World Health Organization (WHO)

Introduction

Recognition of the growing problem of chronic illness due to poor diet and lack of physical activity – the “globesity” crisis and particularly the escalating problem of child obesity – has come belatedly to everyone’s agenda. Oversimplification of the causes and the search for blame has pitched industry, NGOs, legislators, the media and consumers into confusion and even confrontation in Europe and America.

But if any inroads are to be made into combating the rapid growth and escalating cost of diet-related chronic diseases, it will require public and private sectors and communities to work in collaboration towards common goals. These include consumers taking greater personal responsibility for their health, diet and way of life; pro-active education; fair regulation, based on sound science; and industry acting in a socially responsible manner.

Industry has a part to play, and it can do much – in the marketplace, workplace and community where the most progressive companies are already developing initiatives and responses. Industry in general, and the food and food services sector specifically, needs to take a lead in developing partnerships with the public sector to promote both healthy eating and active living, and aligning products, consumer choice and marketing practices to these goals.

Through dialogue with global business leaders and the World Health Organization, the IBLF developed a “road map” for action in the workplace, in the marketplace and in local communities – the international Healthy Eating and Active Living (HEAL) Partnership. It provides a platform to help address the critical issues of marketing and consumer choice, consumer information, reduction of fat, sugar and salt within balanced diets. It also provides partnerships to promote nutrition literacy and physical activity in rich countries and pilots programmes in emerging markets where the problem is also acute.

The IBLF has been glad to work with Weber Shandwick for more than five years on corporate responsibility and reputation issues in Europe – promoting dialogue between companies on issues as diverse as technology, access to healthcare, conflict prevention and human rights. We are pleased to be collaborating with communicators and clients on this new initiative.

Robert Davies

CEO of the International Business Leaders Forum
www.healpartnership.org

Failure to act will be disastrous

Obesity has reached epidemic proportions in many countries. Current data from individual national studies suggests that the prevalence of obesity in European countries ranges from 10-20% for men and 10-25% for women. The obesity rate in children has doubled in the past decade alone.

The health, economic and psycho-social consequences of obesity are quite significant. Obese people suffer numerous health complications ranging from non-fatal debilitating conditions such as osteoarthritis, to life-threatening chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers. The psychological consequences range from lowered self-esteem to clinical depression.

Not surprisingly, the economic impact of obesity and its associated diseases is huge, both in terms of the premature loss of life and healthcare costs. The Washington Business Group on Health estimates that obesity costs private employers in the US up to \$12 billion a year. Recent estimates suggest that between two and eight percent of the total healthcare costs in Western countries can be attributed to obesity.

“The rate of increase of obesity in the UK is exactly the same as in the USA, we are just 10 years behind.”

Dr. Susan Jebb, chair of the Association for the Study of Obesity

The prevalence of obesity has increased by about 10-40% in most European countries over the past decade. The most dramatic increase is in the UK, where obesity rates have more than doubled since 1980. Today in the UK, one in five adults is obese and one in five children is overweight.

Yet according to Dr. Susan Jebb, chair of the Association for the Study of Obesity, many people are complacent about obesity, and feel the problem affects Americans, not Europeans. “The rate of increase of obesity in the UK is exactly the same as in the USA, we are just 10 years behind,” said Dr. Jebb.

Obesity has been referred to as a “healthcare ticking time bomb,” one that threatens to reverse the gains in health and life expectancy made in public health over the past century. While most people in developed countries usually look forward to longer and healthier old age, the rise in childhood obesity raises the spectre that children growing up today may have shorter lives than their parents.

“Obesity takes on average nine years off your lifespan.”

Dr. Howard Stoate MP, co-chair, UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Obesity

There is a clear need to educate the public about obesity and its health risks. Far from being a cosmetic issue, as it is often represented in the media, obesity poses a real risk to length of life. Dr. Howard Stoate MP, co-chair of the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Obesity, points out that a person who is obese at 18 is twice as likely to be dead at 50 than somebody who is not obese at 18. “Obesity takes on average nine years off your lifespan.”

Dr. Stoate believes that society has not taken obesity seriously as a health issue, just as 30 years ago the risks of tobacco were not taken seriously. “For the public, obesity is currently a cosmetic issue, or is about self-esteem. It is not yet in the public’s mind an issue of health. We have to change that and help the public understand that their children are going to predecease them unless we do something about it,” said Dr. Stoate.

“France, and many other European countries, has to be very careful about the worrying increase of obesity among children and commit themselves in a long-term prevention programme which concerns society as a whole, including the food industry.”

Professor Maurice Tubiana, French Academy of Sciences and Academy of Medicine member

New research suggests that such attitudes may be changing. In a recent survey, one in 10 European consumers rated obesity as the most important health threat facing society. The survey of 2,145 consumers in Germany, France, Spain and the UK was conducted by KRC Research for Weber Shandwick, and identified obesity as the fourth-most-mentioned problem after cancer, alcoholism/drug addiction and heart disease, but ahead of other chronic illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension.

The research also suggested that 87% of consumers believed that diet was the most significant cause of obesity among children, while 77% believed that a sedentary lifestyle was almost as significant a cause. Only 25% considered obesity genetics/heredity to be as significant.

So if the message is beginning to get through to the public that obesity is a serious risk to health, now is the time for action. The challenge is in reversing the environmental factors that have brought about the epidemic.

With European consumers increasingly health conscious, as well as inclined to believe the worst about corporations and willing to blame someone else for their problems, there is a “perfect storm” brewing that poses serious consequences to food companies that ignore the warnings. From there, it’s a short walk to laws, regulations and restrictions. Consider this statement from a report by the investment bank, UBS Warburg: “It is very possible that tighter advertising restrictions will eventually follow from the gathering pace of concern surrounding the spread of the obesity epidemic. There will probably be more lawsuits and pressure from consumer groups to change practices.”

A Morgan Stanley research report, *Obesity: A Lingerin Concern*, focusing on the financial risks in the food sector linked to obesity stated that “The food industry needs to be vigilant to preserve its good image with the public”, and pointed out how investors are now looking to the food industry to manage issues in an innovative and pro-active way to avoid the emerging risks of litigation, regulation and reputation damage.

In the end, momentum may matter as much, or more, than the merits.

Confrontation isn't the answer

Understanding the many causes of obesity is clearly an important aspect of tackling the problem. Yet according to Dr. Derek Yach, “There has been an unprecedented and misguided focus by journalists and the media on apportioning all the blame for obesity on fast food chains, and on selected food and beverage manufacturers.”

This kind of approach risks alienating a key group in the obesity debate that can become part of the solution. Robert Davies, CEO of the International Business Leaders Forum, believes the key issue is “whether we get out of this through confrontation, or whether we move forward in a real partnership to tackle what is a real crisis that is simply not going to go away.”

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Dr. Derek Yach, representative of the Director General, WHO

While consumers may recognise obesity as a complex problem and understand that the responsibility for it is shared, their concern is that they lack knowledge and understanding of how to find appropriate solutions.

Some of the key issues currently being debated include the role of advertising; improved, simplified food labelling; portion sizes; exercise; and the role of schools in tackling childhood obesity.

Advertising to children

One of the most contentious issues in the obesity debate is the role of marketing and advertising, with opinions divided on the subject. On one hand, advertising, particularly on television, is charged with encouraging children to consume excessive amounts of foods containing high levels of fat, salt and sugar. On the other, advertisers argue that all they are doing is encouraging competition amongst brands.

While it is clearly one area in which action is being demanded, Dr. Howard Stoa MP believes it would be difficult to introduce regulation on foods and advertising and might well prove counter-productive. “Governments need to guard against being prescriptive and ensure that consumers receive information to enable them to make healthy choices for themselves,” he said.

“We are exploring options and looking at what other countries are doing, and obviously the Food Standards Agency report on advertising will inform policy.”

Imogen Sharpe, head of health improvement and prevention at the Department of Health, UK

However, Imogen Sharpe, head of health improvement and prevention at the UK Department of Health, said UK Ministers felt the industry needed to do more, particularly about fat, sugar and salt. She said that in the UK they would be looking at a range of options within the context of the government’s proposed Food and Health Action Plan. “We are exploring options and looking at what other countries are doing, and obviously the Food Standards Agency report on advertising will inform policy.”

Portion sizes and labelling healthy options

A second factor is clear guidance on portion sizes and what constitutes a healthy diet. The tendency towards super-sizing has occurred on both sides of the Atlantic. Consumers are often encouraged to buy larger-sized portions and “value meals” because they provide better value for money. However, while they may be good for our wallets, they are not necessarily good for our health.

Kath Dalmeny of the UK Food Commission, an NGO acting on food and public health policy concerns, argues for clearer labelling. “The fat content of children’s food and the calorie content of meals sold for children should be signposted and labelled much more clearly to allow people to make informed decisions,” she said.

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Kath Dalmeny, UK Food Commission

The European Commission has set up a Nutrition and Physical Activity network with the Member States and, perhaps more importantly, an ad hoc Group on Nutrition to assist with the task of developing an action plan on nutrition. This group consists of members from several Commission services and provides information on policy developments in the various services as they relate to nutrition, and comments on the consecutive draft versions of the action plan.

Commissioner Byrne has in the meantime also come up with very concrete initiatives, which aim to ensure that we are working towards a healthier diet. The Commissioner's fight against obesity offers a policy that seeks to ensure that consumers can make healthy choices.

"I believe that mandatory nutrition labelling of processed foods would be useful to help consumers make better informed choices."

David Byrne, EU Commissioner for Public Health and Consumer Protection

The most important policy proposal in this area is the Health Claims Regulation, which prohibits any health claim that might be vague, misleading and not scientifically verifiable. Despite Commissioner Byrne's assertion that "there are no 'good' and 'bad' foods," he does seem to be introducing a de facto judgment between good and bad foods, since only food products with specific nutrition profiles (established by reference values of fats, sugar and salt/sodium) will be allowed to carry nutritional or health claims.

Food retailers say that they would like to provide information about healthier options. However, Richard Ali, head of Food Policy at the British Retail Consortium, believes this might be compromised under the European Union's proposal. "The way we see the food industry being stimulated is through education – public information and consistent communication demonstrating how to have a healthy lifestyle," he said.

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Richard Ali, head of Food Policy, British Retail Consortium

Schools and physical activity

Clearly, the educational sector represents an important "environmental pressure point". However, there have been sustained cuts in the amount of time devoted to physical education (PE), as it is under increasing pressure from the core curriculum and school playing fields have been sold off for private development. In addition, there has been little focus on the foods provided in schools.

While acknowledging that schools are very much at the centre of the debate about children and obesity, Ruth Girardet, director of Educational Communications, a consultancy that works with the private sector to develop and implement programmes targeting educational audiences, feels that schools need guidance and help. “Healthy lifestyles and diets are choices but children are very much influenced by context and understanding.”

“For any brand that is perceived as unhealthy to offer healthy eating advice to schoolchildren would be seen as cynical and exploitative.”

Ruth Girardet, director of Educational Communications

Providing educational resources and other help for schools is one area where the private and public sector could work together most successfully, said Ms. Girardet. For example, working with the National Healthy Schools Standard, a private sector organisation, might help schools provide a more enticing dining environment, or could enable them to offer information on balanced diets to parents and children. But she felt this would only work where the company’s motives are transparent and its products or brands actually support healthy lifestyle messages. “For any brand that is perceived as unhealthy to offer healthy eating advice to schoolchildren would be seen as cynical and exploitative.”

It's not about blame. It's about responsibility, understanding and balance.

In response to the obesity crisis, many governments around the world are taking their own actions, exploring options, including “sin” taxes, advertisement bans, education campaigns, physical activity programmes and more. While some countries believe in strong self-regulatory approaches, others feel that the time has come for more regulation.

“What is clear is that people see shared responsibility and expect shared solutions involving partnerships between parents, industry and the public sector.”

Phil Riggins, managing director, KRC Research, Europe

When European consumers were polled on the actions they wished to see to help reduce obesity, it was clear that they were not necessarily looking just for legislative solutions, probably because they did not entirely blame industry for the problem. Instead, the public strongly supported government and corporate actions to address obesity. Consumers were clearly not looking for blanket bans on advertising to children – 53% of respondents were against such a ban – or additional “sin” taxes on certain foods, supported by just 38% of respondents.

Obesity among children		
Desired actions to help reduce obesity in children		
• Favoured actions	% Total	(% Strongly)
– Offer healthier food options	90	(57)
– Voluntary dietary labelling	90	(58)
– Mandatory dietary labelling	88	(57)
– Funds for education campaigns	85	(50)
– Mandatory warnings on-pack	84	(52)
– Sponsor fitness, parks, activities	80	(46)
– Public money for parks, activities	77	(43)

Source: KRC Research

“What is clear is that people see shared responsibility and expect shared solutions involving partnerships between parents, industry and the public sector,” said Phil Riggins of KRC Research. “Consumers want increased options, more general information and education to make an informed choice.”

An industry perspective

Food companies recognise that the causes of obesity are complex. While diet has an important part to play, we also believe that food companies alone cannot be expected to provide the solutions. The WHO's call for concerted action that involves not just governments, NGOs and consumer groups, but the food industry and schools as well, is the right way forward. We want very much to be part of this dialogue and to move forward to play our part in curbing this global epidemic.

We are looking at ways to offer low-fat, low-calorie and low-sugar options and are continuing to look for ways to add healthy dimensions to our products and to our communications.

Dr. Hilary Green, senior corporate nutritionist

Retailers are increasingly looking at positive and innovative ways of bringing food intake and physical activity together. Gill Fine, head of food and health at a leading UK food retailer, said, "We as a company have been doing store tours for many years, first with Diabetes UK, bringing in state-registered dieticians to help people understand how to read food labels. We have moved on to forge links with Roche to look at reading labels in terms of fat and calories, having first worked with GPs on it. These are small steps but they are things we can build on."

"Most companies now accept that there is a problem and that they are part of the solution, which is a very important step forward."

Dr. Derek Yach, representative of the Director General, WHO

Working with private food and related companies had shown Dr. Yach that there was no single "right" approach. "But most companies now accept that there is a problem and that they are part of the solution, which is a very important step forward. The road ahead will probably lie neither in self-regulation nor in government regulation, but in some form of multi-stakeholder approach."

Conclusion

The debate about how to address obesity should not be about blame, but about focus upon understanding, education and responsibility. The WHO has already produced a global strategy that calls on member states and the international community – including private companies and NGOs – to act in concert to address the problem.

Industry in general, and the food industry in particular, clearly has a responsibility to address the issues and be willing to engage constructively with its critics. But the NGO community also needs to understand more clearly how business can be encouraged to move forward rather than retreating into a shell. Finally, government and health authorities should provide clearer guidance about healthy lifestyles to parents and consumers through public education campaigns.

Some considerations for industry

- Review product lines to incrementally reduce sugar, salt and saturated fats
- Ensure that marketing to children does not encourage excess consumption
- Invest in initiatives that promote physical activity, particularly for children
- Review the categories and healthy range of food choices supplied in food vending machines
- Offer more fresh fruit, vegetable and whole grain-based products
- Invest in new products with enhanced health potential
- Provide clearer labelling on products
- Communicate more clearly the initiatives that are being undertaken
- Engage in voluntary multi-sectorial initiatives in food literacy and physical activity

Dr. Yach goes a step further, arguing that obesity will be tackled best by leveraging the social marketing skills of the private sector. By doing so, the private and public sectors together can create and implement initiatives that will educate, support and benefit the health and well being of children. This is precisely the sort of partnership approach that we at Weber Shandwick favour, both at an individual market level and on a pan-European basis.

Our dedicated, Europe-wide Diet & Health Practice is already engaged with the International Business Leaders Forum's Healthy Eating and Active Living (HEAL) partnership, to develop the optimum framework for progress. Our expert consultants from public affairs, consumer marketing, corporate, healthcare and issues management work with public and private sectors and can help on a wide variety of assignments. They can help business define communications programmes that demonstrate credible responses that will make a difference. It is only through the collaboration of all parties that we will find solutions to help overcome the obesity epidemic.

Lord McNally

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“There are clearly areas where we need more research to refine the evidence base. But we know more than enough to begin to take very concrete steps now. It is not diet or physical activity; it is diet and physical activity.”

Dr. Susan Jebb, chair of the Association for the Study of Obesity

“There is a real underlying problem when 20% of kids are suddenly recognised as being obese. There has been a strong push by activists and consumer groups to apportion blame. But the key issue is whether we get out of this through confrontation, or whether we move forward in a real partnership to tackle what is a real crisis that is simply not going to go away.”

Robert Davies, CEO of the International Business Leaders Forum



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