Diabetes: Prevention always better than a cure

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EU policymakers need to take a much stronger approach to combating the growing health threat posed by diabetes, argues Glenis Willmott.

Type 2 diabetes is a growing threat to human health, affecting over 31 million people in the EU, and around 250 million people worldwide.

Estimates suggest that diabetes will affect almost 600 million people globally by 2035 and deaths from diabetes are predicted to rise by 50 per cent over the next 10 years.

The disease, which affects the body's ability to regulate levels of sugar in the blood, can lead to ad-situational complications such as blindness, kidney failure and amputation.
There is no known cure for diabetes and although the condition can be managed, it still kills about 3.4 million people annually. As diabetes is a chronic disease requiring life-long care, it also carries considerable costs to healthcare systems and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that treating diabetes and its complications costs €90bn a year in the EU alone.

Where possible, prevention is always better than cure, and the World Health Organisation (WHO) says that type 2 diabetes can be prevented by 30 minutes of daily moderate exercise and a healthy diet.

The dramatic increase in type 2 diabetes is therefore inextricably linked to the global obesity epidemic. Estimates suggest that 30 per cent of the global population are overweight or obese and a report by the McKinsey Global Institute found that the global cost of obesity is more than €1.83 trillion annually.

In Europe the situation is even worse, with the WHO estimating that over 50 per cent of people in the region are overweight or obese.

Crucially, one in three 11-year-olds in Europe is overweight, which means that if we don't take action now, we will be facing a situation where a third of the population is at risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

If we want people to adopt healthier lifestyles, we have to make it easier for them to do so. I've long campaigned for better food labelling, in order to give people the information they need to make healthier decisions.

When I worked on the EU's food information regulation, I wanted traffic light labels to be mandatory across the EU, as they are a simple but effective way of letting people know how healthy the food they buy really is. I'm also calling for the European Commission to finally set nutrient profiles, so that foods high in sugar cannot be marketed as healthy.

Last week, the UK health agency, Public Health England, published a report on the health impact of sugar and what can be done to reduce the nation's intake.

The report highlights that reducing consumption of sugar could prevent 4700 deaths per year in the UK alone and recommends a number of measures, including restricting advertising of high sugar foods to children and increasing the price of these foods through a tax or levy.

I hope that we will look at advertising to children in the review of the EU's directive on audio-visual media services.

TV chef, Jamie Oliver, is currently leading a campaign for a sugar tax in the UK. Such a tax already exists in Mexico and has had encouraging results. With a recent survey finding that 53 per cent of people in the UK would support such a levy, it's certainly worth considering.

What's clear, however, is that the EU needs to take bold action to combat obesity and prevent a looming type 2 diabetes crisis.
About the author

Glenis Willmott (S&D, UK) is a member of Parliament's diabetes intergroup

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