

NORTH EAST OBESITY FORUM REPORT

Regional Group of the Association for the Study of Obesity

DEBATE: ‘We need a sugar tax, NOW’

The North East Obesity Forum held a meeting on Wednesday 20th April 2016 from 4–6pm at Newcastle University. The format of this meeting was a debate with 2 speakers presenting arguments FOR a sugar tax now and 2 speakers presenting arguments AGAINST a sugar tax now. Presentations were delivered in a Pecha Kucha style followed by an open floor discussion. Approximately 45 delegates attended the session.

FOR presentations

Dr Vicki McGowan, Post-Doctoral Research Associate, Department of Geography, Durham University

When George Osborne announced a new tax on sugary drinks from 2018 many in the public health community hailed this as a step in the right direction towards reducing obesity prevalence. This decision was informed by work conducted by Vicki and colleagues at Teesside University in collaboration with Public Health England. Their review suggested that increasing the price of high sugar products is likely to reduce purchases of these items in the short term. However, there was a limited evidence base which resulted in very little insight into long term effects, whether consumers will switch to alternative high sugar products, and the impact on population level dietary quality. Although there was limited evidence on the potential regressive nature of a tax, a recent evaluation in Mexico has indicated that reductions in purchases were greatest among low socioeconomic households. Despite the limited evidence base, the obesity epidemic waits for no-one and so Vicki argued that we must take whatever action we can to prevent more people suffering from negative physical and mental health as a result of obesity.

Dr Shelina Visram, Lecturer in the Centre for Public Policy & Health, Durham University

Many children consume significantly more sugar than the recommended intake, which contributes to high levels of childhood obesity and tooth decay, particularly in the poorest areas. We know that industry marketing of sugary drinks, including highly caffeinated energy drinks, tends to appeal particularly to young people. The recent HYPER! study found price to be a key factor in young people’s decision’s to purchase energy drinks, and we also know that price is the most important factor influencing consumer product choice generally. There are a number of intervention options, but simply educating children and parents is unlikely to counter the messages produced by global drinks companies. Shelina argued that the sugar tax is one option that has the support of a wide variety of agencies, as well as being supported by more than 50% of respondents in public opinion polls. This figure increases to 70-80% if the question is framed around support for a tax that will generate revenue to be ear-marked for health-related programmes. Conservative estimates are that £276m could be generated in the UK annually. So although the sugar tax is not going to be a ‘silver bullet’ in terms of tackling obesity, it was stated that it could certainly contribute to improvements in health for children and families.

AGAINST presentations

Peter Wright, Environment Health and Trading Standards Manager, Gateshead Metropolitan Council

Peter argued that we DO need a sugar tax, but eventually rather than now. His argument for this view was that obesity is a hugely complex issue that needs academic and medical communities working on the full picture; sugar is only a small part of the obesity picture. His worry was that while we're waiting we will relax and lose the momentum needed to tackle obesity. Peter drew on the previous 'Pasty Tax' proposal to argue that the sugar tax is just another flawed policy waiting for 'the U turn'. He used his knowledge about Law to argue that the sugar industry can challenge the tax's legality and most likely win (he gained support of a barrister who was present in the audience). He also highlighted industry's gift at arguing, and that public support for sugar as the 'new evil' is not yet here; he argued the public will be left confused as many people still believe fat is what they should be avoiding. Finally, Peter used his own personal experience of being obese (before having a gastric bypass 3 years ago) to argue that obese people need a lot more help than simply a sugar tax.

Alison Barnes, Research Associate and Registered Dietitian, Newcastle University

As a researcher and a diabetes and weight management specialist dietitian, Ali looked at the evidence relating to sugar taxation from a public health perspective and also considered the likely impact for individuals who are overweight or obese. Her position on sugar taxation as a means of reducing obesity can be summarised as follows:

- Evidence from countries which have implemented a sugar tax suggests it is unlikely to have a significant effect on calorie consumption – on average a reduction of less than 10kcal per person per day. As a result, it is unlikely to have a significant effect on weight beyond an initial, clinically insignificant decrease (-0.4kg per year based on UK projections). This may bring some individuals below population cut-offs for overweight and obesity, but in reality does little to tackle individual weight issues or associated health problems.
- Demonising a single nutrient ignores the fact that obesity is caused by excess calories, wherever they come from. A whole dietary approach to tackling obesity is required.
- There is evidence that those who prefer sugary drinks could be less likely to change their purchasing behaviour as a result of taxation measures. Would you change your drink choice because of a 7p difference? Would you notice?
- Projections about the products people will swap to may be a cause for concern. Fruit juices and semi-skimmed or whole milk are equally calorific to sugary drinks and therefore although more nutritious will not result in weight reduction. Projections for the UK suggest that most people will switch to diet soft drinks. There is emerging evidence that consumption of artificial sweeteners may be linked to increased weight and insulin resistance. Media coverage of this research has led to public concerns about the safety of diet soft drinks. A sugar tax which does not fit with individual's health beliefs may have limited impact. In addition, given the existing evidence, it seems short-sighted to introduce a measure which, in addressing one health problem, may inadvertently create another one in the longer term.

- Experts agree that although a tax on sugary foods and drinks may be helpful, other measures such as tackling product reformulation, marketing and sponsorship practices and price promotions of high sugar products are all likely to have a greater impact on obesity levels – surely these are the ones we need NOW. Instead we're all focussed on sugar tax.
- The 'threat' of a sugar tax may be more effective than the tax itself. Following the announcement of the tax on sugary drinks, several manufacturers have announced plans to reformulate products or launch new lower-sugar brands. It may be that the delay in implementing the sugar tax has more of an impact on sugar consumption than the tax itself, another reason why we don't need it NOW!