Sick societies. Obesity

Can childhood obesity be controlled?

World Health Organization Commission for Ending Childhood Obesity. Above, Peter Gluckman and Sania Nishtar (the co-chairs), and then come George Alleyne, David Nabarro, Helen Clark, Sachita Shrestha, and Jacques Rogge; and then below, Constance Chan Hon Yee, Hoda Rashad, Betty King, Colin Tukuitonga, Adrian Gore, Nana Oye Lithur, Srinath Reddy, Paula Radcliffe

Our health team reports:

The Commission for Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO for short), set up at the WHO World Health Assembly in late May, held its first meeting on 17-18 July. The brief of the commission includes assessment of the social and economic as well as the health impact of childhood obesity. Announcing the commission, WHO director-general Margaret Chan stated:

Social scientists, public health specialists, clinical scientists and economists will join together to synthesize the best available evidence into a coherent plan. Actors responsible for food production, manufacturing, marketing and retail; maternal health and nutrition; child health, education and health literacy; physical activity; and public policy will also be engaged in the task

We have received an internal report of the first meeting of the commission. Its findings, designed to take account of the best science and also to galvanise all relevant actors into action, are due to be completed in October 2015, for submission to the WHO Executive Board in January 2016. The commission is being guided in its work by working groups on science and evidence, and on implementation, monitoring and accountability, known in WHO as WGSE and WGIMA.

First the good news. The commission is chaired by Peter Gluckman (upper row left, above) He is currently chief scientific advisor to the New Zealand government. He is a world authority on the pre-conceptual and early life origins of health and disease.
As such he understands the cultural and social as well as the biological forces. As a scholar of deep learning he is well aware of the cardinal principle of social medicine, which is the epidemic diseases are symptoms of sick societies. Already showered with honours and recognition, he is not likely to accept standard work leading to a compromise report that gathers dust on bureaucratic shelves. He is also irascible, an admirable quality in a senior UN advisor with a position from which he is most unlikely to be dislodged.

More good news is that the commission members, selected by WHO director-general Margaret Chan, are overall an imaginative group. Great skill has been used to achieve gender, age, geographic and knowledge balance. George Alleyne and David Nabarro (upper row, third and fourth from left) are grizzled heavyweights who have been working at very high level within the UN system for a generation or more. Srinath Reddy (lower row, second from right), is now the most influential public health leader in India. Helen Clark and Betty King (upper row, fifth from left, lower row third from left) have held very senior political positions outside and inside the UN system. Two interesting choices are the dynamic South African entrepreneur Adrian Gore, now the boss of ex-WHO then Pepsi-Co executive Derek Yach (lower row, fifth from left) and Jacques Rogge, until last year president of the International Olympic Committee (upper row, right). Adrian Gore did not attend the July meeting.

The decision to invite young people on to the commission is in principle excellent, and the biographies of Sachita Schrestha from Nepal (upper row, second from right) and Constance Chan Hon Yee from China, a successor to Margaret Chan as director of health in Hong Kong, are exciting. Marathon champion Paula Radcliffe (lower row, right) did not attend the July meeting.

So this is some good news. So is the basic fact that a special commission is now set up to address the currently uncontrolled pandemic of childhood obesity, with its links to the now devastating epidemics of diabetes, adult obesity, and all the disorders and diseases associated with obesity. Also, the commission is advised by two panels including some of the most learned and wisest scholars in the world (including some contributors to WN).

However, at its first meeting the commission was not happy. The brief to the commission from WHO rightly indicates behavioural and nutritional determinants:

Overweight and obesity are critical indicators of the environment in which children are conceived, born, and raised. Childhood obesity is driven by biological, behavioural, and contextual factors. Biological drivers include maternal malnutrition (including both under- and over-nutrition) during pregnancy, and gestational diabetes. Inappropriate infant feeding behaviours include inadequate periods of exclusive breastfeeding and inappropriate complementary foods, as taste, appetite and food preferences are established in early life.
And also points to economic, commercial and political factors:

Physical activity behaviours are also established in early childhood. Contextual and wider societal factors include socioeconomic considerations, nutritional literacy within families, availability and affordability of healthy foods, inappropriate marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children and families, lack of education and reduced opportunity for physical activity...in an increasingly urbanised and digital world.

But the briefing paper from the WGSE sent to the commission apparently took a narrow view of relevant evidence. This is highly surprising, given the profiles and reputations of many of the working group members, listed above. But the WGSE representatives at the July ECHO meeting were told to go away and think again:

The Commissioners commented that the report was heavily focussed on biological risk factors in early life and could be further strengthened by:

- More consideration of the social and cultural context
- More content on equity and the rights of the child
- Proposing suggested terminology and definitions of childhood obesity
- More emphasis on the link between childhood obesity and NCDs
- A scoping exercise on existing public policy
- More data from...interventions, even if not from low and middle income settings
- Suggested prioritisation of interventions and multi component interventions

The Commissioners made suggestions as to the strengthening of sections of the report of the first meeting of the WGSE... In addition, it was suggested that a number of additional working papers should be commissioned from the WGSE and also recognised that additional work may need to be commissioned ... from experts outside the WGSE.

We will report further in Update. We give every good wish to Peter Glickman, his co-chair Sania Nishtar, the ECHO commissioners, the WGSE and WGIMA experts, and others engaged at a critical time in the history of the World Health Organization, and in the epoch of sick societies in which we and our children live now.