



International **Obesity** TaskForce

23rd August 2010

Rt. Hon. Anne Milton, MP
Minister for Public Health

Rt. Hon. Andrew Lansley, MP
Secretary of State for Health

House of Commons
Westminster
London, SW1A 0AA

Dear Minister, dear Secretary of State,

Re: England as a world leader in policy actions to prevent obesity

The rising prevalence of obesity in most countries is creating enormous pressures on health care systems which are straining under the escalating costs of chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and cancers. It is also contributing to an increasingly large proportion of the preventable health burden, overtaking smoking in some high income countries and undernutrition in many low and middle income countries.

At the recent International Congress on Obesity in Sweden, the International Obesity Taskforce (IOTF) reviewed the progress countries were making in instituting effective, sustainable policies for the prevention of obesity. Based on the evidence presented at the conference and the feedback from our network of experts, two countries were clearly taking the lead in obesity prevention – England and Brazil. IOTF would like to highly commend the progress that has been made in England in recent years to address this very challenging societal problem. In particular, IOTF was impressed with the following initiatives:

- 1. World class surveillance schemes:** The Health Survey for England gives annual population data; the National Childhood Monitoring Programme provides detailed data on childhood obesity at a local level; a rolling programme of National Diet and Nutrition Surveys measures diet and physical activity behaviours. These are critical tools for monitoring and evaluation of progress and are the envy of most countries.

2. **Restrictions on unhealthy food marketing to children:** England has taken an evidence-based, stepped approach to reducing marketing directed at children. The evaluation showing reductions in exposure of children to junk food ads without reductions in revenues to broadcasters have been used very effectively to support similar actions in other countries.
3. **Nutrient profiling tool:** The nutrient profiling tool developed by the FSA and applied to restrictions on marketing of food to children has the potential for many other important applications. For example, in Australia it is being used in food education to children, menu labelling in cafeterias, and by the Food Standards of New Zealand to categorise foods for eligibility for health claims.
4. **Front of pack nutrition labelling:** The need for consistent, consumer-friendly, informative nutrition 'signposts' (like traffic lights) on the front of packs is being increasingly recognised internationally and England has again taken a lead in developing and testing the best systems.
5. **Action with industry on reformulation:** The food industry is actively reformulating products to reduce saturated fat, sugar, salt and energy density but we recognise that the encouragement by governments in this endeavour is a vital stimulus to progress.
6. **Change4Life:** There was a specific presentation at the International Congress on Obesity on Change4Life and it showed an impressive approach to social marketing in its broadest sense. This stands in direct contrast to other countries where campaigns (if they are conducted at all) tend to be narrow, poorly-researched TV ads which are not integrated with on-the-ground activities directed at sustained behaviour change.
7. **Commitment to evaluation of policies:** Evaluation often falls off the end of the agenda and IOTF was particularly encouraged to see the early evaluation data coming out from Change4Life, school food standards, and food marketing restrictions.
8. **Modelling of the future burden of obesity and potential solutions.** The early Foresight work on obesity was a landmark analysis and is quoted in every obesity conference as a step change in how people think about obesity. IOTF sincerely hopes that this foundation will be revisited in the near future to assess progress against its original projections.

Ministers, this is an impressive start in developing a suite of policies and programmes to prevent obesity. If other countries were following England's lead,

we would have much more positive news to present to the obesity conferences on progress in obesity prevention. However, there is much more to do if the full benefits are to be realised and we urge you to continue to invest in obesity prevention as part of a long-term strategy to reduce the burden of disease, contain health care costs and increase workforce productivity.

Accordingly, we encourage the new Coalition Government to build on this foundation by maintaining what has already been achieved and developing new policy approaches to tackle obesity and the underlying unhealthy eating habits and low levels of physical activity. We note that the European Congress on Obesity will be hosted by the UK Association for the Study of Obesity, in Liverpool in 2013 and this will provide a great opportunity to showcase England's progress to that point.

IOTF recognises that the journey to reverse the rise in obesity will be a long one with many challenges, especially from commercial vested interests, along the way. In any complex and contested endeavour to improve societal outcomes, a combination of government policies, community programmes, capacity building, and individual actions will be needed but it is the vision and commitment of the political leaders that makes a real difference between progress and no progress.

IOTF would like to highly commend the programmes and policies to tackle obesity that are making a difference for the population of England, especially the children and adolescents to whom society has a special responsibility. Obesity is a global epidemic with no easy or short-term answers, so in addition, we would like to acknowledge the international leadership that England has provided for other countries. This leadership will be critically important in addressing the underlying environmental determinants of obesity, some of which are global in nature. If the IOTF can assist in working with your Government in any way to build on this excellent base, we would be happy to do so.

Yours sincerely



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On behalf of the IOTF Scientific Advisory Council

IOTF Scientific Advisory Council

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