

For discussion on
14 January 2008

Legislative Council Panel on Health Services

Promotion of Healthy Eating in Restaurants

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on a campaign to promote healthy eating, which will be launched by the Department of Health (DH) in collaboration with restaurants in Hong Kong.

Background

2. Choices of food are growing apace with social and economic developments, and dining out is on the rise. For many people, there has been a shift from the conventional diet, which is rich in vegetables, carbohydrates and fibre, to one that is laden with protein and fat as well as a relatively high content of oil, salt (sodium) and sugar. In the long run, consumption of a diet which is unbalanced in nutritional content will not only lead to obesity but also pose risks to health.

3. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends the following key features in a balanced diet-

- increased consumption of fruit and vegetables;
- limited intake of fats;
- limited intake of sugar;
- limited intake of salt (sodium); and
- attaining energy balance and a healthy body weight.

4. To ensure that the public has easier access to dishes that meet the above-mentioned health principles when they eat out, the DH will work with restaurants to launch a new round of healthy eating promotional campaign to encourage the public to maintain a balanced diet while enjoying their food.

Local Situation

5. Non-communicable diseases such as cancer, heart diseases and cerebrovascular diseases are the major causes of death in Hong Kong. These three categories of diseases accounted for 56% of all registered deaths in 2006,

thus imposing tremendous burden on our health care services. In the DH's Heart Health Survey conducted from 2004 to 2005, it was found that about 48% of the respondents were overweight or obese; about 7% had diabetes and about 39% had hypercholesterolaemia. The findings of the Population Health Survey 2003/2004 also showed that about 27% of the respondents had high blood pressure. Unhealthy eating habit is one of the major causes of these health problems. However, the findings of a behavioural risk factor surveillance conducted by the DH in 2006 indicated that only 22% of the respondents consumed at least 5 servings of vegetables and fruit (i.e. 400 grams) a day on average. In other words, whilst people are aware of the importance of a balanced diet, many have yet to act accordingly.

6. On the other hand, it is common for Hong Kong people to dine out. The Baseline Survey of the EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign conducted in March 2007 showed that 27%, 44% and 6% of the respondents had their breakfast, lunch and dinner away from home for more than five times each week respectively. The survey also found that 60%, 40% and 27% of the respondents felt that food served in restaurants was too oily, salty or sweet respectively. Among the respondents, 84% and 53% respectively opined that restaurants did not provide enough fruit and vegetables. Another key finding of the Baseline Survey was that over 90% of the respondents hoped to have more healthy food choices when eating out.

Objectives of the Campaign

7. In the light of the findings, the DH will launch an EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign with relevant organizations to encourage and assist restaurants to provide more dishes with fruit and vegetables as main ingredients, and with less oil, salt and sugar. This would make available more healthy choices for customers, making it easier for them to follow the principles of healthy eating when eating out.

Implementation

8. The EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign will adopt a multi-pronged strategy which is in line with the "Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health" advocated by the WHO. That includes creating an environment that is conducive to healthy eating, education and support, publicity and advocacy, as well as research and evaluation. The Bangkok Charter for Health Promotion in a Globalized World promulgated by the WHO at the Sixth Global Conference on Health Promotion in 2005 also pointed out that cross-sectoral collaboration was the cornerstone for improving population health. Given this, the DH established a Taskforce in April 2007, with representation of the Food

and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD), the Hong Kong Federation of Restaurants & Related Trades, the Association for Hong Kong Catering Services Management, the Association of Restaurant Managers, the Chinese Cuisine Training Institute, professional organisations and consumer representatives. The Taskforce steers the entire campaign, and actively consults the catering industry and explores the feasibility of the Campaign.

9. The success of the Campaign hinges on, among other key factors, whether the customers will choose to order healthy dishes, and hence increase the sales volume of such dishes. The capability of restaurants in preparing healthy dishes that are appealing to customers in look, smell and taste will also have a direct bearing on the effectiveness of the Campaign. To this end, the DH has made reference to similar campaigns abroad and has worked closely with the local catering industry to develop nutritional benchmarks tailored to the local situation and needs. Training and support will also be provided for restaurant staff to strengthen their ability to design and prepare healthy dishes.

10. It is equally important to step up public education and promotion on healthy eating habits. Participating restaurants will pledge to provide at least five healthy dishes (called “EatSmart Dishes”) on their regular menus. Such dishes should include those belonging to the categories of “More Fruit and Vegetables”¹ and “3 Less”². They are also required to display an EatSmart Campaign decal at prominent locations and “EatSmart Dish” icons on menus to remind and encourage customers to choose those dishes. Continuous efforts will also be made to disseminate the message of healthy eating to the public through different channels while encouraging the catering sector to publicise and design new healthy dishes for the public.

Outcome of the Pilot Project

11. To test the feasibility of and public acceptance of the Campaign, the DH launched a one-month pilot project in the summer of 2007. Nearly 300 Chinese restaurants and fast food restaurants participated. The DH subsequently conducted a survey on 50 randomly selected participating restaurants and interviewed 500 customers and 200 restaurant staff to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot project.

¹ Dish of “More Fruit and Vegetables” refers to dishes that have only vegetables and fruit as ingredients or where portions of vegetables and fruit are more than twice that of meat.

² Dish of “3 Less” refers to dishes that use less fat or oil, salt and sugar in cooking or preparation and meet the “three less” requirement.

12. Findings of the survey indicated that 50 restaurants have provided over 400 new EatSmart Dishes on their menus during the month. All of the interviewed restaurant staff indicated that they could work well to meet the requirements of the project and 95% of them found more customers opted for healthier dishes, while 62% of the restaurants reported that the sales volume of the healthier dishes rose. As for the customers, their feedback was positive with 99% welcoming the initiative launched in the restaurants and 75% indicating they would patronise the restaurants again for the healthy dishes.

Launching of the Territory-wide Campaign

13. Having regard to the views of the taskforce for EatSmart@restaurant.hk Campaign and the experience gained from the pilot project, the DH will extend the Campaign across the territory in collaboration with various stakeholders. The Taskforce has revised the details of the Campaign, and made specific arrangements regarding the eligibility of restaurants to participate in the Campaign, staff training, continuous support, use of publicity materials as well as collection of customers' feedback.

14. As part of its efforts to promote the Campaign, the DH will send out enrolment forms to the catering industry through the newsletter of FEHD, and encourage catering operators to join the Campaign through trade associations. The Campaign will be further promoted to the catering operators and the public by a press conference and a dedicated webpage. Moreover, the DH will extend invitations to restaurants through members of the Taskforce and community-based networks. In early 2008, the DH will launch a territory-wide publicity drive and the public may access a list of EatSmart restaurants from the webpage or recognize them from the decal exhibited prominently in the premises. Most of the 300 restaurants participating in the pilot project have shown interest in joining the territory-wide Campaign.

15. Enrolment status of participating restaurants will be valid till the end of each year. To ensure that the participating restaurants have met the requirements of the Campaign, the DH will conduct random visits to their premises. All the participating restaurants are encouraged to proactively communicate with the customers, so as to understand and meet their need. If feedback from visits or customers' opinions indicates that a participating restaurant has inadequacies, the DH will require the restaurant to follow up and confirm in writing that improvement measures have been taken. The DH will report the progress of the Campaign to the Taskforce from time to time, and consult the Taskforce before cancelling the enrolment status of any participating restaurant.

Evaluation

16. The DH will monitor the development of the Campaign and evaluate its effectiveness. It will keep in view the progress, such as the number of participating restaurants, media coverage, response of the public to the Campaign as well as their level of satisfaction for the healthy dishes, etc., and compare the eating habit of the public before and after implementation of the Campaign through the DH's Behavioural Risk Factor Surveillance System.

Department of Health
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