

## **Legislative Council Panel on Health Services**

### **Promote Healthy Eating Habit among School Children**

#### **Purpose**

In the 2005 Policy Address, the Administration has set out promoting healthy eating habit among school children to protect the public from life-style diseases as one of the new initiatives. This paper seeks to elaborate on the background of the initiative and how the Administration plans to take it forward.

#### **Background**

2. Obesity poses a growing threat to public health and creates significant economic burden to the society. It is common in both developed and developing countries, and affects men as well as women, children and adults. It brings about health consequences that range from physical to psychosocial problems and results in conditions that vary from non-fatal ones affecting quality of life to premature death. It also increases health care costs and reduces productivity. Direct economic costs of obesity assessed in several developed countries are in the range of 2% to 7% of total health costs.<sup>(1)</sup>

3. Childhood obesity is already epidemic in some countries and on the rise in others. Around 22 million children under five are estimated to be overweight worldwide.<sup>(2)</sup>

#### **Situation in Hong Kong**

4. In Hong Kong, obesity tops the list of our public health issues. A recent Population Health Survey jointly conducted by DH and the University of Hong Kong revealed that about 40% of the population was overweight/obese. The Student Health Service of DH recorded a rising trend of obesity among primary school students, from 16.4% in 1997/98 to 18.7% in 2003/04. The problem is more serious

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<sup>(1)</sup> World Health Organisation, Obesity : preventing and managing the global epidemic. Report of a WHO consultation on obesity, Geneva : WHO, 2000.

<sup>(2)</sup> World Health Organisation. Global strategy on diet, physical activity and health. Obesity and overweight. Fact. Available at: <http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/publications/facts/obesity/en/> Accessed 15 March, 2005.

in primary school students than in secondary school students. As in other parts of the world, this phenomenon is the combined effect of sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy diet rich in animal fats and proteins, refined carbohydrates and sugars, and lacking in fruits and vegetables.

5. Childhood obesity is also associated with elevated risk factors for cardiovascular diseases. Studies have shown a tendency for obese children to remain obese in adulthood. The Administration therefore considers that while promotion of healthy eating habits at the community level should continue as part of the health education efforts, focused efforts should be placed in primary school children as cultivation of such habits is more effective if it is to start when one is young. Healthy eating habit adopted in children is more likely to be sustainable.

6. DH has been doing a lot in promoting the importance of healthy diet among members of the community, as part of its on-going efforts in fostering a healthy lifestyle. As far as school children are concerned, such efforts include school-based programmes like guidebooks and pamphlets featuring useful information in healthy eating, menu-planning targeting at primary and secondary school students, health talks at schools, surveys on eating patterns of students, and studies on school-based environmental intervention to promote healthy eating, etc. Some of these activities are organized in collaboration with other government departments (e.g. Education and Manpower Bureau, Food and Environmental Hygiene Department), district councils, community groups, non-governmental organisations and tertiary institutions.

7. These efforts have helped engender among school children a higher awareness about healthy eating, as evident in the result of a qualitative survey undertaken by DH in 2004. Nonetheless, the study also revealed that despite the fact that students possessed the knowledge about healthy eating, their dietary practices remained unhealthy as a result of ‘barriers’ such as heavy snack consumption, peer influence, lack of available healthy foods at home or in schools. These factors highlight the need for heightened and dedicated efforts in creating a conducive and health-conscious environment to nurture children’s eating habits. Schools, parents, students, food suppliers, and other relevant sectors of the community all have an important part to play.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Initiative**

8. The Administration considers that to effectively manage the obesity epidemic, everyone in the community must take responsibility and action. To contain the problems of childhood obesity, the Administration aims to intensify and deepen efforts

on the following fronts :

- to raise the awareness of the importance of healthy eating among students, teachers, parents and the public;
- to improve the knowledge, attitude and practice towards healthy eating among primary school students; and
- to create a school and wider environment that supports healthy eating.

## **Approach and Strategies**

9. While DH's promotional efforts so far involved collaboration with other government departments, NGOs, stakeholder groups, etc, an overall strategy to involve relevant sectors in the society in an integrated and comprehensive manner in tackling childhood obesity is yet to be developed. In taking forward the initiative, a partnership approach based on strong intersectoral collaboration involving integrated programmes with the participation of/undertaken by government departments, school staff, students, parents, food suppliers, professional bodies, and academia will be adopted. Making reference to successful local and overseas experience, DH will deploy the following strategies.

### *Educational interventions*

10. To enrich and consolidate what students have learned in the school curriculum with regard to the learning goal of leading a healthy lifestyle, DH will work with the education sector in developing a series of interactive learning resources for use in schools. Ample opportunities will also be provided for students in applying their knowledge, practising their good eating habits through contextualized learning activities, co-curricular / life-wide learning programmes in real life situations.

### *School environment that supports healthy eating*

11. Schools can potentially play a stronger role in shaping dietary patterns of children and adolescents. Schools are places when knowledge is imparted, values nurtured and practices reinforced. With children spending a lot of their time in schools, and some of them having lunch at schools, schools are an ideal setting to promote healthy eating habits. We seek to cultivate a school environment that promotes and supports healthy eating by facilitating the development of relevant school policies and guidelines. DH will develop such policies and guidelines in consultation with the Education and Manpower Bureau and the school community to build up schools' capacity in adopting and implementing health promoting work. Active engagement of school staff and food suppliers e.g. lunchbox suppliers and

tuckshop operators, will be an integral part of this strategy. One possible way forward is to motivate food suppliers to offer healthy food choices in schools.

### *Support from parents and the community*

12. To reinforce healthy behaviours acquired in schools, DH will work with parents, community leaders and organizations, health professionals and the media, to provide a wider and embracing context that supports learning and development of students. Parental involvement is particularly important to achieve the greatest impact in bringing changes to eating habits among school children. A host of extra-curricular and promotional events reaching out to different target groups will be lined up to generate a high level of public awareness and support for healthy eating among school children.

13. To maximize community input, DH will capitalize on the healthy cities movement that is being advocated in some districts as a means of improving local community health. The healthy cities projects were developed worldwide and hailed by the World Health Organisation as an effective means to respond to public health challenges through community participation and ownership, intersectoral collaboration at the district level and local governance. Through pooling together community efforts and resources, promotional efforts unique to circumstances of a particular district can be developed to maximize their positive impact, and to create a supportive environment for healthy eating among children.

### **Way Forward**

14. A multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary team, comprising medical practitioners, nurses, dietitians, health promotion officers, research officers, and media and marketing personnel, has been set up to map out implementation details of various programmes. It is envisaged that the programmes will roll out in the 2006/07 school year.

### **Evaluation**

15. The programmes will be subject to a comprehensive review in early 2008. Their outcome will be measured by :

- changes in knowledge, attitude, and practice in relation to healthy eating among primary students; and
- changes in the school capacity to address healthy eating issues through policy and practices.

16. A baseline study of knowledge, attitude and practice on healthy eating among primary school students and school's existing environment in support of healthy eating will soon be conducted. Results of the comprehensive review will be compared with those of the baseline assessment and used to formulate longer term strategies. Prevalence of obesity among primary school students will also be monitored.

### **Advice Sought**

17. Members are invited to note and comment on the content of this Paper.

Department of Health  
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