

**Written submission to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs,
Tackling Childhood Obesity**

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On behalf of the Choosing Healthy Eating for Infant Health (CHERISH) study team, I would like to thank the Chairman and the committee for the invitation to present on the challenge of tackling childhood obesity.

The CHERISH study is a Health Research Board funded study focused on the area of infant feeding and childhood obesity. My name is Dr Karen Matvienko-Sikar and I am speaking today as a postdoctoral research fellow on the CHERISH study, which is an interdisciplinary collaboration between University College Cork, National University of Ireland Galway, and Trinity College Dublin.

The first two years of life represent a critical window for the prevention of childhood overweight and obesity. How, what, and when parents feed their child during this time influences children's feeding behaviours, preferences and subsequent weight outcomes. Feeding behaviours therefore represent important modifiable targets for childhood obesity prevention. Primary care healthcare professionals (e.g. General Practitioners, Public Health Nurses) have frequent contact with parents of young children. In Ireland, children currently have up to 24 contact points, such as routine vaccination visits, with healthcare professionals in the first two years of life. As such, healthcare professionals are in a unique position to guide and influence parent feeding behaviours to prevent childhood obesity.

To date the CHERISH study has conducted a number of studies to inform development of an evidence-based infant feeding intervention to be delivered in primary care in Ireland. As a result of the findings of our research to date we have a number of key recommendations for primary care based infant feeding childhood obesity prevention in Ireland. These recommendations are as follows:

In terms of content and foci of obesity prevention strategies, these strategies must focus on informing and training parents in accurate and developmentally appropriate responses to child feeding cues. Early child feeding supports must include and acknowledge the importance of family and friends in infant feeding. This can be done by developing family or community based strategies, or by providing information to parents about the role of family and friends in their infant feeding experience. In addition, infant feeding must be considered as a process with changes over time for children and parents. Provision of support to parents by healthcare professionals for both positive and negative experiences, which can change over time, is important to promote healthy infant feeding and prevent childhood obesity.

In terms of delivery of infant feeding advice and strategies in Ireland, this must be done in a clear and consistent manner across healthcare professionals using appropriate trustworthy additional resources. Provision of adequate resources, training and capacity for healthcare professionals to deliver infant feeding interventions is crucial. There is also a need for greater consensus/clarity regarding the role of healthcare professionals in relation to infant feeding in primary care.