

Submission to DCYA on Tackling Childhood Obesity.

May 9, 2018

Brief introduction

My background is a Public Health Physician. Before 2011, I worked as a public health specialist with HSE. In 2011 I was appointed Associate Professor of Public Health at Trinity College in the Discipline of Public Health and Primary Care and I continue to retain a commitment to the Health and Wellbeing Directorate of the HSE via its Health Intelligence Function.

I am a Member of the Scientific Advisory Committee of the National Longitudinal Study of Children: Growing Up in Ireland. I am Chair of the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland (RCPI) Policy Action Group on Obesity which carried out a consultation exercise on the National Obesity Policy on behalf of the Department of Health and Children. More recently I am a Member of the Clinical Advisory Group in Obesity in HSE.

In terms of my research I am Co-applicant on a HRB-funded Inter-disciplinary Capacity Enhancement Award (ICE) for *“Designing evaluating and implementing a pilot complex intervention in childhood obesity CHERISH”*. (The CHERISH group have made a separate submission-hence infant feeding interventions are not considered in this submission). This work and associated SafeFood funded project on *“Weaning practices in the Island of Ireland”* have potential to change policy and practice in the prevention and management of childhood obesity. I was Co-applicant for the HRB funded European project on Determinants of Diet and Physical Activity, Knowledge Hub (DEDIPAC-KH) and Irish PI for a project on *“Conditions for the successful implementation of good practice and multi-component interventions for diet, physical activity and sedentary behaviour”*, 2013-2016.

Factual information

One quarter of Irish children are overweight and obese. However the proportion is much higher in socially disadvantaged communities. Although overall levels have stabilised, obesity levels have continued to rise in children in lower socio-economic groups (SEGs)⁽¹⁾.

Obesity prevention in Schools

I have been Irish PI of international research ⁽²⁾ on factors facilitating implementation and maintenance of interventions and policies promoting physical activity and healthy eating. Our study provides in-depth exploration of the facilitators and barriers to successful implementation and sustainment of national public health obesity prevention interventions in schools and makes recommendations on how to overcome the identified barriers. Our findings draw attention to the importance of context, identification of the core components of an intervention and adaptation of non-core components in enhancing intervention sustainability and scale-up. Our findings are generalisable across different settings and are highly relevant to those involved in the development and/or adaptation, organisation or execution of national public health interventions in schools; policy makers, guidelines developers, and staff involved in their local organisation and delivery. A separate study on implementation of the Irish Projects (Food Dudes and Green Schools Active Travel) has been

submitted for publication and can be made available on a confidential basis to the Committee on request.

At a recent meeting with Department of Agriculture to discuss these research findings I became aware of their intent to review the School Milk Scheme in terms of need, frequency of supply and storage which need to be addressed as milk (and water) are being promoted as healthy alternatives to Sugar -Sweetened Drinks (SSDs) .

My recent presentation to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly made me keenly aware of the opportunities to address issues of common interest in addressing obesity. The recent collaboration on the sugar tax is one such example.

Addressing the obesogenic environment

It is part of the plan for the new children's hospital in St James's to have a Ronald McDonald House to provide accommodation for parents of seriously ill children. The charity is embedded in this sector internationally. In my view this branding is at variance with our goal of counterbalancing the obesogenic environment.

The RCPI Policy Action Group on Obesity is a multidisciplinary group of health professionals working together to tackle obesity. It had a key role in advocating for the introduction of the Sugar Tax on SSDs. Its recommendations on prevention and treatment which are still valid can be accessed below ^(3,4). Its function on treatment of obesity is now taken over by the National Clinical Advisory Group.. The Group will continue its work on advocating for preventive measures. Additional recommendations addressing the advertising, marketing and sponsorship of HFSS to children are made.

Addressing weight bias (stigma)

Children from Lower SEGs are less likely to participate in the COSI Programme ⁽¹⁾ and are more likely to be stigmatised.

Links to publications

1. Heinen MM, Murrin C, Daly L, O'Brien J, Heavey P, Kilroe J, O'Brien M, Scully H, Mulhern LM, Lynam A, **Hayes C**, O'Dwyer U, Eldin N, Kelleher CC., The Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) in the Republic of Ireland: Findings from 2008, 2010 and 2012, Dublin, Health Service Executive, 2014.
[www.ucd.ie/t4cms/COSI%20report%20\(2014\).pdf](http://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/COSI%20report%20(2014).pdf).
2. Muellmann S, Steenbock B, De Cocker K, De Craemer M, Horodyska K, Bell J, Luszczynska A, Hayes CB, O'Shea MP, Langøien LJ, Roos G, van den Berg M, Hendriksen, M. Rugseth G, Terragni L, De Bourdeaudhuij I, Brug J, Views of policy makers and health promotion professionals on factors facilitating implementation and maintenance of interventions and policies promoting physical activity and healthy eating: results of the DEDIPAC project, BMC Public Health, 17, 1, 2017, 932-.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4929-9>
3. Royal College of Physicians in Ireland (RCPI). Policy Group on Obesity. The race we don't want to win. Tackling Ireland's obesity epidemic, RCPI, Dublin: Ireland, August, 2014. <https://rcpi-live-cdn.s3.amazonaws.com/wp->

content/uploads/2016/01/The-Race-We-Dont-Want-to-Win-Tackling-Irelands-Obesity-Epidemic.pdf

4. Royal College of Physicians in Ireland (RCPI). Policy Group on Obesity. An expert report on how to clinically manage and treat obesity in Ireland, Dublin: Ireland, October, 2015. <http://www.medfit.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Expert-Report-on-Obesity-October-2015.pdf>

Recommendations to the Committee

General

1. Ensure that all policy measures introduced to address childhood obesity are evidence-based and subject to equity audits so that their impact on disadvantaged children is maximized.

Better support for obesity prevention in schools

2. Work with the Department of Education and Skills (and other Departments e.g. Environment) to address the structural and organisational barriers to implementation of healthy eating and physical activity interventions in schools and in provision of necessary supports. Particular attention needs to be focused on DEIS schools to prevent widening the inequalities gap that currently exists.
3. Work with the Department of Agriculture in a review and transformation of the outdated School Milk Scheme.

Addressing the obesogenic environment

4. The new Children's Hospital should dissociate itself from McDonalds and alternative funding models should be examined.
5. Work with the Department of Health in monitoring and conducting surveys/evaluation of the voluntary agreement with industry on the marketing and sponsorship of HFSS foods to children under 12 in the non-broadcast media and on extension of the age limit to age 15.
6. Work with the UK to introduce extend regulation on advertising of HFSS to children in the broadcast media to cover UK-produced programmes.

Addressing weight bias (stigma)

7. Research needs to be undertaken on evidence-based interventions (?media and school based campaigns) to prevent and mitigate weight bias.

Research

8. Identify priorities for research and support these through funding calls.