

Tackling obesity in schools and the promotion of health eating

Presentation to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills

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Representation from University College Dublin

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Opening statement

Dr Celine Murrin, Assistant Professor Public Health Nutrition, UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science.

On behalf of Dr Bel Serrat and Dr Mirjam Heinen, who unfortunately could not attend due a prior commitment, I would like to thank the Chair and the Committee for the opportunity to present current research evidence on childhood obesity from the National Nutrition Surveillance Centre. Before I present a summary of recent findings I would like to provide you with some background to the Centre and our role in addressing childhood obesity in Ireland.

The National Nutrition Surveillance Centre (NNSC) has been in existence since 1991 and has a track record of providing robust surveillance and scientific data to colleagues in the research community and to policy makers.

Towards the end of the last century, the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity in adults led to concerns over similar trends in the childhood population. In 2005, the World Health Organisation's Regional Office for Europe issued recommendations and guidelines for regular collection of data on weight, height, and waist and hip circumference in children worldwide. In the same year, the Department of Health published the report of the National Taskforce on Obesity and recommended the development of a national database of growth measurements for children and adults that would allow for monitoring of prevalence trends in underweight, normal weight, overweight and obesity. In 2008 the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive commissioned the NNSC to commence this surveillance work among primary school children in the Republic of Ireland. This Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI) was repeated in 2010, 2012 and most recently in 2015 and the data enables us to look at trends over time in our childhood population.

Key Findings:

- The prevalence of overweight and obesity in first class children appears to be stabilising overall.
- The prevalence of overweight and obesity was significantly higher in girls than in boys across all rounds.
- A reduction in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in non-disadvantaged schools was apparent.

- Overweight and obesity rates in 2015 in disadvantaged schools were the lowest compared with previous rounds.
- Older children (8 years and over), also show a stabilisation in overweight and obesity prevalence
- Older girls were more overweight and obese than older boys.
- Disadvantaged schools had a higher prevalence of overweight and obesity in comparison with children in non-disadvantaged schools.
- The prevalence in disadvantaged schools appears to increase as children grow up.

Targets

- Clear targets have been set out by the Government in the Obesity Policy and Action Plan published in 2016.
- A sustained downward trend in the prevalence of overweight and obesity of 0.5% per annum.
- A reduction of 10% in the gap between in obesity levels between the highest and lowest socioeconomic groups.

Strategies

Tackling obesity requires a multi-level and cross sectoral approach as outlined in the original National Taskforce on Obesity (2005). Schools are just one of many settings which need to implement strategies to address the determinants of overweight and obesity in children.

Within the school setting we need to consider what is feasible to change. As part of a pan-European project which collated evidence on the determinants and diet and physical activity (DEDIPAC) we have a better understanding of the determinants which are more easily modifiable and those which might have a greater population effect.

Policies to support healthy nutrition environment in schools

Evidence from COSI shows that Irish schools are making progress in improving the school environment. Key indicators include provision of milk and water, non-provision of sugar sweetened beverages, sweet snacks and salted snacks. Provision of fruit and vegetables is the one area that requires improvement.

Further recommendations are identified in the submission statement.

Other relevant NNSC work

- Planning for fifth round of the Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (2019)
- School Meals Programme – Evaluation of the Nutrition Standards for School Meals
- Healthy Vending Machines in the HSE Hospitals – Evaluation of adherence to policy.

Other relevant research projects

In addition to the NNSC work, UCD School of Public Health is also conducting collaborative research within other academic institutions and centres including the UCD Institute of Food and Health and the Health Research Board funded Centre for Diet and Health Research. Some of the research projects include the Lifeways Cross-Generational Cohort Study, the European Joint Programming Initiative – Determinants of Diet and Physical Activity (DEDIPAC), the Evaluation of Food Dudes in

conjunction with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and the *Safefood* funded project exploring treat food behaviours. [ENDS]