

European Congress on Obesity Press Conference - June 1 2005

EU Commissioner heralds new obesity strategy (embargo 10 am CET)

A Europe-wide code of conduct to rein back the marketing of “unhealthy” food to children and broader policy initiatives across agriculture, education and transport are being planned to tackle the obesity epidemic, EU Commissioner Markos Kyprianou disclosed today (June 1).

In a message delivered at the launch of the European Congress on Obesity in Athens, Mr Kyprianou, the Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection announced the EU would publish a new strategy on diet and physical activity before the end of the year. He said that the United Kingdom, which takes over the EU Presidency from Luxembourg on July 1, had pledged to keep obesity firmly on the agenda during its six-month term.

“Together, obesity, poor nutrition and lack of physical exercise are among the leading causes of death in Europe, leading to cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, respiratory problems and an increased risk of cancer. Put bluntly, today’s overweight teenagers are tomorrow’s middle-aged heart attack victims,” he said.

“Addressing obesity is not only important in public health terms, it will also reduce the long term costs to health services and boost Europe’s economy by enabling our citizens to lead healthy and productive lives well into old age,” he added.

He said the EU Platform for Action on Diet and Physical Activity, which he launched in March, committed all its stakeholders to doing more to fight obesity.

“The Commission is discussing with European advertisers the scope for an EU-wide code of conduct to rein back the marketing of unhealthy food to children. And of course, the fight against obesity needs to be considered in the range of EU policies, such as agriculture, education and transport, that can have an impact on the epidemic. These actions will form the basis of an overall EU strategy on diet and physical activity which I will publish later this year,” Mr Kyprianou added.

In an interview with the International Association for the Study of Obesity magazine, *Obesity Newsletter*, the Commissioner said Europe needed more research into obesity and better data on trends in the epidemic, particularly among children.

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He said the EU was at the early stages in discussing how best to track the obesity epidemic in Member States by collecting the data in a systematic and comparable way as part of the health information strand of the EU Public Health Programme, but he thought it would be years before good EU-wide data was available on the obesity epidemic.

Enlarging on his statement, he said the food industry and advertisers had been told “very directly” that they must stop advertising high fat, high sugar and high salt foods to children. He was hopeful that business would back away from the “hard sell” to children and said it was significant that some big food companies have already pledged to stop or limit certain types of advertising to children.

“Industry is beginning to get the message that this sort of marketing is no longer acceptable. Of course, if the food industry and their advertisers do not deliver on self-regulation, public authorities – both at EU and national level – will be compelled to act to protect the health of our children.”

He said the International Obesity TaskForce’s report last year “provided a salutary shock” in documenting the scale of childhood obesity in Europe, particularly in southern European countries that had felt the “Mediterranean diet” protected them from the epidemic.

He now would be discussing the role of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy in fighting obesity, while the Education and Culture DG was keen to coordinate with us on the role of schools and sports organisations in fighting obesity. Senior officials from other Brussels directorates would be involved in the EU Platform for Action on Diet and Physical Activity.

On obesity research, he said EU support already runs into millions of euros, but further research was needed in other policy areas relevant to the fight against obesity: transport, urban planning and sports as well as food policy.

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Note: Details of the EU Platform are available from the EU website:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/platform/launch_en.htm

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for up to date contact number for media from June 1-4.**