



„Obesity – threat of the 21st century“

13th European Congress on Obesity –May 26-29 2004

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EU ACTION NEEDED ON OBESITY TREATMENT AND PREVENTION

Demands for greater action to tackle obesity throughout the enlarged European Union were made by medical experts meeting in Prague today.

They want to see the issue put at the top of the EU health agenda after governments reached agreement at the World Health Assembly on a global strategy to address diet and physical activity.

Speaking at the European Congress on Obesity, Professor Vojtech Hainer, next president of the European Association for the Study of Obesity (EASO) said governments needed to recognize that treatment of obesity should become a top priority along with effective prevention policies.

Professor Hainer, who chairs EASO's management task force, unveiled new European guidelines for obesity aimed at providing the medical profession with a "road map" for best practice in treating patients.

"Preventing further weight gain is sometimes an achievement in itself, but even a small reduction in weight can lead to significant improvements and a reduction in the risk levels for some other co-morbidities," Professor Hainer, who is co-president of the Congress.



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Prof Peter Kopelman, current EASO president and the chair of the UK's Royal Colleges' working party report on obesity, *Storing Up Problems*, said: “Every nation is now paying a significant human and financial penalty from the medical complications of obesity – most worryingly, the development of type II diabetes in children and young people.”

He said that a major new development being announced at the Congress was the establishment of a Fellowship scheme, a new professional status that recognises members of the medical profession with outstanding skills and experience in the field of obesity, as part of a joint action between EASO and IOTF which includes a new online training programmes for doctors.

Professor Claude Bouchard, president of the International Association for the Study of Obesity said that more funding for research was needed. “It is time for all those interested in meeting the challenges brought about by obesity and its co-morbidities to work together to lobby governments and research funding agencies to increase the research budgets for obesity to match its significance on the global burden of disease,” he added.

Professor Philip James, chairman of the International Obesity TaskForce, said countries both inside and outside the EU also needed to develop broad based strategies, building on work already begun as part of WHO's European Food and Nutrition Action Plan already approved by 51 states.

Key proposals the IOTF wanted to see on the European health ministers agenda include:

- A common public health policy for EU
- An EU agency established with powers to tackle public health issues such the prevention of non-communicable diseases including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancers
- Effective controls on marketing to children, including television advertising and other promotions
- A “traffic lights” labelling scheme to distinguish which foods contribute to healthier diets
- Health impact assessments in all Commission policies



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Prof James said that the EU system of subsidies should be further reviewed to switch the emphasis from support for production of sugars, fats and oils to greater production and distribution of fruits, vegetables and legumes.

“There are some cases where countries even tax fruit and vegetables – the very foods we know we need to consume to improve our health – while others actually have tax exemptions and subsidies for the kind of ingredients and food products we know we are overconsuming,” he added.

He said the EU needed to adopt a robust approach to handling the food and drinks industries and the retail sectors to ensure they make a serious contribution to addressing the challenge of improving diets with better reformulated products and a greater emphasis on fresh produce and less emphasis on the mass marketing of foods with high energy density combinations of fat, sugar and salt.

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