Informed public is best weapon against diabetes

Personal choice is all very well, but that choice needs to be based on a real understanding of what’s in that bubble tea.

Teo Yik Ying

Malnutrition is a problem often perceived to be linked to food shortages, but many people do not realise that it can also be caused by excessive consumption of empty calories, such as from sugar.

While close to one billion people across Asia face the threat of food shortage, twice as many are overweight or obese.

This double burden of malnutrition is a threat to governments and societies in Asia, not solely in its impact on health but also on economies due to productivity loss.

The McKinsey Global Institute estimated that the cost of obesity for the global economy is similar to that from smoking.

Obesity is no longer described as a “problem of affluence”, but rather as one of the biggest global public health threats.

We are seeing a similarly catastrophic impact on low- and middle-income countries, as well as rich developed nations with more advanced healthcare systems and educated populations.

The narrative around what causes obesity and related medical conditions, such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases, has shifted over past decades from vilifying trans-fat to putting a spotlight on sugar. This is hardly surprising, given the volume of research linking excessive sugar consumption to obesity.

**GOVT’S SUGAR PROPOSALS**

Just before Christmas, the Ministry of Health and Health Promotion Board (HPB) announced a public consultation to solicit views for four proposed measures to reduce Singaporeans’ intake of sugar from pre-packaged sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs).

These measures include mandatory front-of-pack labelling of nutritional content and restricting the amount of SSB advertising on television and mass media channels.

Two other measures attracted the majority of online buzz, though: an excise tax on pre-packaged SSBs, and a complete ban on SSBs with excessively high amounts of sugar.

Not unexpectedly, criticisms such as “nanny state” and “tax-hungry government” began to proliferate on social media. There were even cries of “Singapore is increasingly boring” as people discussed the sugar campaign alongside recent measures against tobacco.

Globally, governments have to straddle a difficult and very thin line between enacting measures aimed at protecting the health of populations, versus offering citizens the democratic right to make personal choices.

**OTHER MEASURES NEEDED**

When it comes to managing sugar consumption, Singapore has already started adopting a range of measures, including prohibiting the sale of beverages with excessive amounts of sugar in schools and public sector buildings. The HPB also introduced the Healthier Choice symbol to highlight products with lower levels of sugar.

But these are not enough.

There is a need for a concerted nationwide campaign to highlight the excessive amount of empty calories—those that have no nutritional value—consumed daily from SSBs, including popular beverages such as bubble teas and calorie-dense coffee combinations from cafes.

For such a nationwide campaign to be effective, there is a need for different approaches to reach out to the different strata of the population. For example, the advertising ban is primarily aimed at restricting children’s exposure to high-sugar products, which in turn decreases parental purchases to satisfy children’s whims.

Educating the public to be more conscious of their shopping choices, especially with regard to SSBs, is not draconian or undemocratic in nature.

So, is a total ban on pre-packed high-sugar drinks tantamount to depriving consumers of their personal choices?

Should such a total ban materialise, it may appear that individual freedom has yet again been infringed upon in the name of promoting public health.

Singapore already plans to ban pre-packaged drinks with more than 12 per cent sugar in 2020, with the explicit support of seven major soft drink manufacturers.

Still, a standard 330ml serving of such a drink with 12 per cent sugar content effectively contains 40g or around 10 teaspoons of sugar, whereas the World Health Organisa tion recommends no more than six teaspoons per day for better health.

What about the sugar tax, which several neighbouring countries including Brunei, Thailand and the Philippines have introduced?

To date, sugar taxes have been typically implemented by policymakers through a selective excise...
tax – where products are taxed at the point of manufacturing, rather
than sale – on food and non-alcoholic beverages with high sugar con-
tent, especially SSBs.

One popular argument is that sugar taxes make products with high sugar content more expen-
sive, therefore reducing demand. However, this is misguided, as un-
less the tax rate is prohibitively high, the actual price increase to con-
sumers is unlikely to deter the majority of the population.

The reality is that sugar taxes are mainly aimed at influencing the
food and beverage (F&B) industry, rather than changing individual be-

The challenge is that a responsi-
bility in the industry aims to maximise profits, while a re-
sponsible decision in public health agencies aims to improve the
health of the whole population.

The Thai government’s strategy
is one that Singapore can look at.

While the SSB tax was introduced
in September 2017, the actual imple-
mentation will happen gradually in
three phases over the next six
years. Rather than a knee-jerk pol-
icy response by regulators, this ap-
proach allowed the Thai govern-
ment to review the impact on con-
sumers and encourage longer-term reformulation.

In this regard, private-public part-
nership is important to ensure the
industry is part of the solution
and can adapt appropriately to de-
velop healthier products.

The Singapore Government and
the food industry must collectively agree on a strategy that benefits ev-
everyone and is sustainable.

Steps are already being taken.

The HPB’s announcement of a
$35 million grant to support innova-
tion in healthier ingredients signals
a commitment to backing the food
industry and nurturing home-
grown solutions.

This is also an example of how rev-
ue generated from a sugar tax could be channeled in a positive way by incentivising manufacturers to reformulate, or by subsidising healthier options for consumers.

There is no quick fix that can ad-
dress sugar consumption at the
country-wide level. While it is the
government’s responsibility to cre-
ate a regulatory ecosystem that en-
courages the private sector to pro-
vide healthy options, individuals
shoulder the responsibility for
what they put in their bodies.

Given the increasing magnitude of malnutrition and diabetes, it is un-
likely that the general population’s eating habits will improve without
major policy interventions.

Singapore’s most powerful
weapon in the bigger fight against
malnutrition and diabetes is an in-
formed public that understands the
benefits of a balanced diet and ac-
tive lifestyle. This is where we can
call our part in the fight.

— Professor Teo Yi Ying is the
dean of the Saw Swee Hock School
of Public Health.

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