

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 link-

ing 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 cafe chains.

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 reduces 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 Organisation recommends not 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



The Health Promotion Board's Healthier Choice symbol highlights healthier food options, including those with lower levels of sugar, but there is a need for a concerted nationwide campaign to show the excessive amount of empty calories consumed daily from sugar-sweetened beverages.

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tax – where products are taxed at the point of manufacturing, rather than sale – on food and non-alcoholic beverages with high sugar content, especially SSBs.

One popular argument is that sugar taxes make products with high sugar content more expensive, therefore reducing demand.

However, this is misguided, as un-

less the tax rate is prohibitively high, the actual price increase to consumers 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 behaviour. Taxation has the effect of encouraging, if not compelling, the F&B industry to reformulate and innovate its products.

It can be an effective way of facilitating the development of healthy sugar replacements, therefore improving the health of the population.

When the F&B industry rejigs its formulae of popular SSBs to fall below the taxation bands, this provides a long-term and impactful change to the supply of calorie-dense SSBs, instead of trying to change the individual behaviour of millions of consumers.

However, implementing the different sugar measures will need to be carefully thought through, which is perhaps the reason for the public consultation.

History shows that industry needs to be given adequate time to reformulate or innovate products to become healthier.

After the denouncement of trans-fat in the 1990s, many food companies developed “low-fat” offerings by using sugar as a taste replacement. This has in part contributed

to the present conundrum.

The challenge is that a responsible decision in the F&B industry aims to maximise profits, while a responsible 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 implementation will happen gradually in three phases over the next six years. Rather than a knee-jerk policy response by regulators, this approach allowed the Thai government to review the impact on consumers and encourage longer-term reformulation.

In this regard, private-public partnership is important to ensure the F&B industry is part of the solution and can adapt appropriately to develop healthier products.

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

Steps are already being taken.

The HPB's announcement of a \$35 million grant to support innovation in healthier ingredients signals a commitment to backing the food

industry and nurturing home-grown solutions.

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

There is no quick fix that can address sugar consumption at the country-wide level. While it is the government's responsibility to create a regulatory ecosystem that encourages the private sector to provide healthy options, individuals shoulder the responsibility for what they put in their bodies.

Given the increasing magnitude of malnutrition and diabetes, it is unlikely 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 informed public that understands the benefits of a balanced diet and active lifestyle. This is where we can all play our part in the fight.

• Professor Teo Yik Ying is the dean of the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health.