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Feature Article

Bitter Truth about Sugar

Did you know that the rate of consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) have doubled in the country over the last decade or so (1997-2007) with intake likely highest in adolescents.?

The possible reasons for this increase is said to be unmonitored spending money amongst children; socio cultural influences and most shockingly- strong influence from food/drink companies.

Studies carried out by Pacific Research Centre for the Prevention for Obesity and NCDs (C-POND) revealed that children are keen to consume sugar-sweetened beverages in part because of their exposure to advertising. These products are heavily marketed by the companies to promote and sponsor major sporting events.

The negative impacts of frequent consumption of these sugar sweetened beverages seem never ending- needless to say that it has a major role to play in the early tooth decay in children and is an important contributor to obesity. Type two diabetes which is a lifestyle disease is now found in children as young as 12years of age.

In March the World Health Organisation (WHO) released new draft guidelines on the sugar intake for adults and children. This guideline is suggesting that a reduction to below 5% of total energy intake for an average adult is preferable, this is around 25g (5 tsp) of sugar a day. The guidelines apply to all sugars added to food by the manufacturer, cook or consumer.

Recently, a high-powered workshop was organized to tackle this most burning issue – the Consumer Council of Fiji in collaboration with Diabetes Fiji and National Food and Nutrition Center, organized a workshop on the impacts of sugar sweetened beverages and marketing of ‘junk food’ to children.

This workshop discussed at length, the dangers of the sugar-sweetened beverages and its harmful impact on the health of the children and the nation as a whole. The stakeholder’s who attended the workshop agreed on the **urgency** of tackling the issue of increased marketing of such products to children for the benefit of the young generation.

They made the unanimous call to say **“no to sugar-sweetened beverages and yes to regulation on the marketing of unhealthy food to children”**.

The workshop also saw the establishment of a national alliance of like-minded organization to tackle this pressing issue, which continues to cost Fiji not just money to treat NCDs but also expertise, talent, productivity and ultimately loss of young lives.

Some of the participants at the workshop raised concern on sugar-sweetened beverage manufacturers and junk food manufacturers highly promoting their products by sponsoring major school tournaments where children are directly exposed to their products through such means.

Also, it has been brought to light that imposing/increasing taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages is possibly a good way to control the sales of such items to children. This would control intake as children particularly are price sensitive.

A growing number of researchers believe a tax on sugary drinks and other restrictions on their advertising and sales should be part of the solution to our sugar habit. It's not hard to see why.

It must be noted that combinations of strategies are needed to tackle NCD. The Ministry of Health cannot do this on its own.

There are already initiatives in place. For example in July 2007, Nauru implemented a 'sugar levy' of 30% tax; Tonga and Cook Islands in 2013 introduced taxes on SSBs. In 2002, French Polynesian Government implemented local and import taxes on SSBs to establish a prevention fund in response to NCD; Tokelau has banned sugary drinks; France, Hungary and Ireland all have taxes; In USA, 33 states have either enacted taxes on sugar or introduced legislation to curb marketing.

The Consumer Council would like to see healthy choices are being made more affordable to consumers. There are still a number of families which are unable to afford healthy food so they are left with little choice or no choice but to spend on unhealthy food and beverages. For instance, the reality today is that a bottle of water costs more than a soft drink!

Remember, health is wealth and still can be sweet without all that sugar!