

DRAFT

Nutrition, Physical Activity and Cardiovascular Disease Prevention:

A challenge for Europe and its Heads of States

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Hotel Silken Berlaymont, Brussels

Report from the Conference

Hans Stam, President of the European Heart Network welcomed all participants to the conference. He emphasised that cardiovascular diseases (CVD) are responsible for almost half of all deaths in Europe. Stam warned that CVD, together with other major chronic diseases, have the potential to bankrupt health systems and put a brake on every country's economy. On the prospect of asking people to work beyond the age of 65, Hans Stam reminded the conference that the EU average healthy life expectancy is below 62 years. He ended on a positive note stating that acting robustly now on diet and physical activity will help reduce premature death and disability from CVD significantly.

Mike Rayner (Director British Heart Foundation Health Promotion Research Group, University of Oxford and Chair of the EHN nutrition expert group) introduced the report on *Diet, Physical Activity and Cardiovascular Disease Prevention in Europe*, which was made available to all participants at the meeting. Rayner referred to the scientific reviews that had been carried out and included in the report. He explained the rationale for having intermediate and longer-term goals for nutrition and physical activity. Mike Rayner stressed that the goals are not for individuals but population goals provided for decision makers who must develop implementation measures to make sure these population goals are achieved.

Philip James (President of the International Association for the Study of Obesity, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine) whilst giving a global overview of diet and physical activity and their impact on CVD and chronic non-communicable diseases, James put the focus on salt and saturated fats. He referred to long-standing evidence on the substantial decrease in CVD deaths achieved by decreasing intakes of saturated fat and salt. Philip James regretted that the media often confused people by reporting summary conclusions from studies indicating that salt were not a problem. James demonstrated how diet amplifies smoking's effect on CVD. He called for immediate action on the three global killers: tobacco, alcohol, and foods high in fat, sugar or salt.

Franco Sassi (Senior Health Economist at the OECD) outlined the findings of OECD/WHO research on the prevention of cardiovascular and chronic diseases. Sassi reported recent evidence showing that obesity alone is responsible for 7 million excess cases of coronary heart disease and stroke and 8 million excess cases of diabetes in the US. He argued that prevention can be effective in improving health. He claimed that prevention would not automatically lead to savings in health care expenditure, although in most cases it

is cost-effective. Prevention, Sassi added, will likely decrease health inequalities, though not to a major degree. Sassi emphasised that comprehensive strategies combining population and individual approaches give best results.

Paola Testori Coggi (Director General of DG Health and Consumers, European Commission) acknowledged the magnitude of chronic diseases and cardiovascular diseases and gave an overview of measures taken so far by the European Commission to prevent them through tobacco control, nutrition and alcohol policies. Testori referred to the recent adoption of the food information regulation and affirmed that nutrition and physical activity is a central priority in the EU's health policy. Testori also outlined the reflection process on chronic diseases, initiated under the Belgian Council Presidency, and the consultation process with member states and stakeholders. She was looking forward to the European Heart Network's input into the process. Paola Testori was confident that the European Heart Network's new report on diet and physical activity would contain policy recommendations that would be useful for innovative actions in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

A panel discussion took place in the afternoon, moderated by Kate Trollope, editor of EU Food Policy.

Despina Spanou (Principal Advisor, DG Health and Consumers, European Commission) responded to the European Heart Network's call for firm targets stating that the High Level Group on diet and physical activity had agreed, already in 2008, a framework for a 16% reduction of salt over four years. Spanou added that in 2011, the Group had agreed to consider a similar framework for fat, saturated and trans fats as well as sugar. The reductions are to be achieved through voluntary measures by the food industry and the setting of voluntary targets by Member States. She added that regulatory interventions depended on political will and that, so far, there have not been any calls from Member States to go in that direction at an EU-level. 1.

Lars Hoelgaard (Special Advisor, DG Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission) opened his statement by being provocative. Hoelgaard said that DG Agri and the Common Agriculture Policy were not there to promote public health. That was the role of DG Sanco. He conceded that DG Agri could do something, notably through programmes like the school fruit scheme. But, Hoelgaard maintained that consumers were given ample choices but needed to be educated about food and nutrition.

Linda McAvan (MEP, co-chair MEP Heart Group) reacted strongly to the fact that DG Agri did not acknowledge its important role in promoting public health. McAvan insisted that subsidies drive production which decides what gets to the consumers. She expressed her disappointment that mandatory front-of-pack nutrition labelling with traffic light was not included in the food information to consumers regulation. McAvan finally pointed out that "free choice is fine but that it was not necessarily there. Choice is limited by the actual offer of products, how they are displayed and promoted. It also depends on your purchasing power – so very often there is no real choice.

Else Molander (Danish representative of the high level group on nutrition and physical activity) outlined how the legislation on trans fats came about in Denmark. Molander explained that the legislation had been adopted because of large inequalities in intakes of trans fats in Denmark. She added that the Danish food industry had largely accepted the legislation, likely because it provided a level playing field. Else Molander informed the conference that a saturated fat tax had been introduced recently in Denmark. It was too early to draw any conclusions about its effectiveness. She said Danes were used to high taxes and that a sugar tax had been in place for decades. Finally, Molander mentioned that the recently elected Danish government had announced that it would consider further taxation of unhealthy foods in 2013.

Joao Breda (Programme Manager, Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity Programme, Division of Noncommunicable Diseases and Health Promotion, WHO - Regional Office for Europe) welcomed the new European Heart Network report. Breda took the audience through some of the work of the WHO, including the second action plan for food and nutrition (2007-2012), its work on marketing to children and nutrient profiles. He highlighted the importance of the development of further fiscal and marketing policies. He underlined the need for eliminating industrially manufactured trans fats, also in countries where the average intake is relatively low, because the averages mask higher intake in lower socio-economic groups.

Ruth Veale (BEUC Head of Food, Health, Environment and Safety Department) spoke about the activities of the European consumer organisation on food marketing to children. Veale stated that the failure to tackle this issue undermined any other actions addressing child obesity. She also asked when the European Union was going to legislate in this area, in other words: when do they consider that there is enough evidence that voluntary action by the food and advertising industry does not go far enough or fast enough. Veale also expressed her concern about the European Commission's considerable delay with the claims dossier, in particular the proposal for nutrient profiles and the absence of a decision on how to go forward with the assessment of botanicals.

Marta Baffigo (Kellogg's, representing FoodDrinkEurope) stressed the considerable reformulation efforts made by the food industry so far. She added that apart from reformulation, discussion on portion sizes and consumption frequency is on-going. Baffigo spoke about the labelling system put in place by the food industry, which helped the consumers in understanding the nutritional content, and the voluntary measures taken to limit advertising to children. She felt that the food industry is very cooperative in addressing obesity and diet-related diseases.

Concluding the debate, **Kate Trollope** referred back to the evidence-based report which the European Heart Network launched at this conference. It contains all the evidence needed to get messages across to policy makers. Trollope expressed the hope it would be used and distributed widely to continue the debate on nutrition, physical activity and health promotion and disease prevention in Europe.

Closing the conference, **Susanne Løgstrup**, spoke about the importance of nutrient profiles in classifying food as healthy or less healthy and in determining when foods could bear claims or be advertised to children. Løgstrup referred to the Impact models that showed that at least 50% of decrease in CVD mortality over the last decades was achieved through prevention

activities on diet (decrease in saturated fat and salt) and physical activity. She set out how the report would be rolled-out across Europe through regional and national meetings. Susanne Løgstrup thanked the European Union for its co-funding of the dissemination of the report, which is part of the EuroHeart II project.