

Children and obesity and associated avoidable chronic diseases project

Results from a base-line study

Abridged report

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Introduction

On 1 March 2004, the European Heart Network (EHN) started a 32-month research project on Children Obesity and Associated Avoidable Chronic Diseases. The aim of this project is to contribute to reducing the obesity epidemic and associated avoidable chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes among children and young people (aged 16 years and under).

In order to determine whether the project will lead to the expected results, ResCon Research & Consultancy is evaluating organisations from the 20 participating countries. More specifically, ResCon is collecting data on the extent to which the project has led to:

1. increased awareness of the impact of food marketing on current consumption patterns of children and young people amongst participating organisations (national co-ordinators) and the organisations they work with (alliances) in their countries,
2. Increased reported activity in combating the negative effects of food marketing on current consumption patterns of children and young people amongst participating organisations (National Co-ordinators) and the organisations they work with in their countries.

To determine the base-line for this evaluation, ResCon completed a base-line survey that covers representatives of 181 organisations in 18 countries during the period October through November 2004. The organisations surveyed are national heart foundations and allied organisations. Early in 2006, ResCon will repeat this survey (post-test) in order to determine changes in awareness and reported activity that can be attributed to the project's activities.

Research questions

Toward achieving the expected results above, we addressed the following specific research questions:

1. How do organisations in this study perceive the scope and seriousness of the obesity problem in their country (alliances)?
2. How do the national heart foundations and allied organisations in this study perceive the impact of marketing and media on current consumption patterns of children and young people?
3. To what extent do organisations (alliances) believe that they are informed about this subject?

4. To what extent and how are national heart foundations and allied organisations involved in activities directed at combating the negative effects of food marketing on consumption patterns of children and young people?
5. What priority is given to this problem within the organisations' policies?
6. To what extent are the organisations planning to introduce new actions on tackling the obesity problem amongst children and young people within the next 12 months (2005)? (National Heart foundations and selected allied organisations)
7. What kind of, and to what extent do, barriers hinder the organisations from combating the negative effects of food marketing?
8. Which factors contribute to the success of these actions? (National Heart foundations and selected allied organisations)
9. What are the opinions of the organisations in this study toward the way(s) the obesity problem is / should be tackled?
10. Which factors are related to the 'level of activity' of the participating countries?

Research methods and response

To answer the research questions both qualitative and quantitative data from national co-ordinators of participating heart foundations and relatively well informed allied organisations were collected. We also collected quantitative data from other (relatively less informed) allied organisations in 18 participating countries.

The qualitative questionnaire was meant to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. It was to be completed by the contact person (as national coordinator) and also by one or two organisations he/she works within the country and that are relatively active and well informed about children and obesity.

The quantitative questionnaire was meant to collect quantitative data only. It was to be completed by representatives of organisations and other individuals with whom the national coordinator works—individuals and organisations that are (still) relatively inactive in tackling the obesity problem among children and young people.

In total 181 completed questionnaires were received from 18 countries; 41 of them were qualitative questionnaires: 41 questionnaires from national coordinators and representatives of relatively active and well informed organisations and 140 from representatives of relatively less informed organisations. Health foundations were represented best in this study. Nearly

40% of the organisations consider themselves as such. Medical organisations, women's and youth organizations were far less represented.

Analyses were carried out at: a Pan-European level, at regional level and at a national level. We distinguished between three regions: northern Europe, central Europe and southern Europe.

Results

Awareness

The first question (perceived scope and seriousness) was asked of representatives of what we called 'relatively less informed organizations'. Over a 90% of the respondents consider obesity as a serious health problem in their own country. No significant differences were found in 'seriousness scores' between northern, central and southern European countries. Also over a 90% of the respondents considered the impact of marketing and media on current consumption patterns of children and young people in their country as high (54.1%) or very high (39.2%). Especially the impact of broadcast advertising was perceived as (very) high. Relatively lower impact was ascribed to advertising on the Internet, the impact of food labelling and the impact of education at school.

Per country mean 'awareness' scores were calculated and compared with a 'European' mean score. Southern European countries perceived the impact of advertising on the Internet to be significantly lower than northern and central European countries. No significant differences between the three regions were found for the other 'perceived impact items'.

Level of information

Similarly, we analysed the 'perceived level of information' about the subject. In the quantitative study (among relatively less informed organisations) we asked the respondents to what extent the organisation considers itself informed about the impact of food marketing on consumption patterns of children, on ways to tackle the effects of food marketing, on regulatory and self-regulatory requirements in this respect and on ongoing activities tackling this problem in their own country and in other European countries. Most (69.3%) respondents indicated that they are (rather) well informed about ongoing activities tackling the obesity problem in their own country. At the same time the knowledge of the respondents about the impact of food marketing on consumption patterns of children and ways to tackle this problem is scored much lower.

Respondents indicated to be relatively less informed about ongoing activities to tackle the problem in other European countries. Northern and central European countries perceived their knowledge about ways to tackle the effects of food marketing on consumption patterns of children lower than southern European countries did ($p = .10$). Northern and central European countries also scored lower than southern European countries about knowledge of on-going activities tackling the obesity problem in other European countries ($p = .08$). No significant differences between the three regions were found on the other 'perceived information items'.

Activities in combating the negative effects of food marketing

All organisations that participated in the qualitative study (heart foundations and 'well-informed' other allied organisations) indicated to be active in tackling the negative effects of food marketing on consumption patterns of children and young people. In total 68% of the organisations that participated in this study indicated to be involved in activities to tackle the effects of food marketing on consumption patterns of children and young people: all of the organisations that participated in the qualitative study and 57.9% of the participants in the quantitative study.

Respondents assessed their contribution to be highest in giving information to parents and /or children to help them make healthy food choices and to promote physical activity. They assessed their contribution to be lowest in establishing regulatory frameworks, regulating the types of foods available through vending machines at schools and entering into agreements with the food (marketing) industry.

Northern and central European countries assessed their contribution to entering in agreements with the food (marketing) industry lower than southern European countries did ($p = .07$). No significant differences between the three regions were found for the other 'assessed contributions'.

Priority, policy plans and future activities

Most organisations that participated in the study give relatively high priority to the obesity problem: 83% of the respondents in the qualitative study and 54% of the respondents in the quantitative study. Northern and Central European countries place the priority given to the obesity problem lower than southern European countries ($p = .08$).

About a third of the respondents (from 15 countries) in both studies indicated that their organisation has a policy statement about tackling the obesity

problem of young children. Respondents in the qualitative study whose organisation has no policy statement on this issue (70.7%) indicated in about 45% of the cases that their organisation plans to develop a policy on this issue.

Respondents in the quantitative study whose organisation has no policy statement on this issue (66.4 %) indicated in about 25% of the cases that their organisation plans to develop a policy on this issue. About 20% thought not and 55% was not sure.

All respondents in the qualitative study (n=41) were asked if their organisation is planning to introduce any new actions to tackle the obesity problem among children and young people within the next 12 months. And if so, to describe them briefly. Especially new educational campaigns (at schools), public awareness campaigns, (research) studies and collaboration projects were mentioned in this respect.

Barriers and factors contributing to success

All heart foundations and allied organisations were asked to what extent their organisation encountered problems in establishing actions to combat the negative effects of food marketing on current consumption patterns of children and young people. Lack of financial resources, lack of governmental support and lack of human resources are mentioned most often mentioned as important barriers. Lack of expertise and lack of management commitment were seen as less important barriers. Northern European countries report significantly fewer barriers related to difficulty of achieving consensus ($p = .03$) and lack of management commitment than central and southern European countries ($p = .05$). No significant differences between the three regions were found for the other encountered barriers.

Respondents in the qualitative study were asked which factors, in their opinion, contribute to the success of actions that have taken place / will take place on this subject. Especially, more collaboration between organisations, more attention in the media that is sympathetic to the subject, more research data that make the urgency of the problem visible and more governmental support were mentioned in this respect.

Attitudes

A substantial part of the questionnaire dealt with attitudes of organizations to ways to tackle the obesity problem. Nearly all respondents shared the opinion that more efficient food advertising and food promotion should be introduced. However, opinions on how to tackle the negative effects of food marketing

varied considerably. For example: about 45% of the respondents (strongly) agreed with the statement that self-regulatory codes of practice on food advertisements should be preferred above statutory controls. But 40% of the respondents (strongly) disagreed with this statement.

Furthermore it was found that a majority of the respondents (82%) are in favour of more bans on advertisements that encourage foods high in sugar, salt and or fat and bans on the availability of fast foods and soft drinks in schools. To a lesser extent the respondents seemed to be in favour of self regulatory codes.

Nearly 75% of the respondents had the opinion that their (national) government does not pay sufficient attention to protecting children from marketing of energy-dense, low nutrient foods. About 40% of the respondents agreed with the statement that their organisation pays sufficient attention to this subject.

By comparing the mean scores of northern, central and southern European countries on the statements above, we conclude that there are hardly any differences in opinions between the three regions. There are, however, two exceptions. First, northern and central European countries agree to a stronger extent than South European countries ($p = .06$) on the statement that 'advertisements that encourage the consumption of foods high in sugar, fat and / or salt should be banned'. Second, southern European countries agree to a stronger extent than northern and central European countries with the statement that 'efforts to modify unhealthy eating habits which focus at public education, and 'counter marketing' programmes aimed at balancing the effects of marketing of health damaging products, should be given preference above regulations' ($p = .02$).

Factors related to the level of activity

In comparing countries that consider themselves as 'relatively active' (score above European mean score) with countries that consider themselves as 'relatively less active' in tackling the (negative) effects of food marketing on consumption patterns of children and young people, we found that 'relatively active' countries:

- consider obesity amongst children and young children as a more serious health problem
- are more aware about the ways to tackle the negative effects of food marketing
- are more aware of the ongoing activities tackling this problem in their own country

- indicate that their organisation places a relatively higher priority at tackling the problem
- more often disagree with the statement that advertisements to children that encourage the consumption of foods that are high in sugar, fat and / or salt should be banned
- are better informed about the problem (have more knowledge of how to tackle the problem)
- more likely belong to central and southern European regions.

Conclusions and recommendations

The evaluation of the project 'Children and obesity and associated avoidable chronic diseases' focuses primarily on whether the project will lead to increased awareness of the impact of food marketing and increased activity in combating the negative effects on current consumption patterns.

Based on the results of this baseline study, we conclude that the awareness level of the participating organisations about the seriousness is already relatively high. Furthermore, they are also aware of the impact of marketing and the media on current consumption patterns of children and young people in general and the impact of broadcast advertising. Therefore, this awareness will only need to be maintained through communication activities during the forthcoming year.

In contrast, organisations are less aware of the impact of the internet, food labelling and food marketing on consumption patterns at schools. More attention should be paid to increasing organisations' awareness of these impacts.

The organisations perceive their level of information to be low in three areas:

- knowledge about the impact of food marketing on consumption patterns
- knowledge on how to tackle the effects of food marketing and
- knowledge on regulatory and self-regulatory requirements.

Especially the relatively less informed allied organisations perceive their level of information to be low. Therefore, broad attention needs to be given to these issues in the participating countries. Participating countries should exchange more information about their on-going activities, the barriers that they meet and how they tackle them.

Exchange of experiences may contribute to an increase in activities among national organisations in combating the negative impact of food marketing on

consumption patterns of children. Even though most organisations are aware of the scope and the seriousness of the problem and give a relatively high priority to combating this problem, over a 40% of the relatively less informed organisations are not yet actively combating the problem.

The participating organisations reported to be especially active in giving information about healthy food choices and also in promoting physical activity. Although they promote regulation and legislation, and enter into agreements with the food industry to a lesser extent, they do favour extending these activities. To this end, we recommend promoting regulation and legislation and stimulating agreements with the food industry to combat the negative effects of food marketing in the forthcoming year. Especially national and local governments could be more active and should take more responsibility in this matter. The European Committee can, perhaps, play an active and supporting role in stimulating national governments to give high priority to the problem.

Our analysis of the data suggests that especially three types of 'efforts' to change the behavioural patterns of organisations are related to increased activity level of the organisations. These efforts aim to:

- increase awareness of and ways to tackle the obesity problem
- maximise the exchange of experiences between and within participating countries and
- raise the priority given to the problem (especially by national governments).

Although we intended to discover 'determinants' of the reported activity levels through multiple regression analyses, an unforeseen practical problem prevented us from establishing a cause and effect relationship. Both the number of completed questionnaires and the variation in the number of questionnaires per country that were completed precluded establishing a statistically relevant relationship between 'behavioural determinants' and 'activity level'. However, through one-way analyses of variance we found that the three above mentioned factors (efforts) strongly and positively relate to an organisation's activity level in tackling the effects of food marketing on consumption patterns of children. We consider these factors to be 'motivating' factors that stimulate organisations' to tackle the obesity problem.

At the end of 2005 or the beginning of 2006, the survey will be repeated (post-test study) in order to determine changes in awareness and reported activity. To that end, the same organisations that participated in the baseline study will be asked to participate in the post-test study. Data concerning organisations that did not participate in the baseline survey can not be used

to determine the effects of the project interventions. We do, however, recommend that ' new ' organisations be stimulated to take part in the post-test survey, as they will contribute to a representative picture of the 'state-of-affairs' at that time. Analysis of all of the data at the end of the project will lead to solid conclusions about the progress in tackling the obesity problem both at a national and at a pan-European level. These conclusions, in turn, will provide a solid basis to better specify future interventions.