

Tonio Borg

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

Commissioner Borg delivers speech on Nutrition and Physical Activity

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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health, addresses the High Level Group on Nutrition and Physical Activity

Brussels, Belgium, 10 June 2014

SPEECH

Members of the High-level Group,

Members of the EU Platform for Action,

I am very pleased to be here with you today to address, jointly, our key stakeholders on Nutrition and Physical Activity – the Member States of the High-level group, and the organisations and companies of the Platform.

We have been working together for a long time; and I believe we have come a long way in promoting a balanced diet and physical activity.

This being said, there is still a long road ahead of us.

Obesity rates remain stubbornly high – a matter of great concern, not just for experts but for all EU citizens.

We all know that half of European adults are overweight or obese.

And a whole generation of children with high prevalence of obesity is growing up, and growing larger, as we speak.

These children risk having a lower quality of life now, and in the future; obese children are likely to remain obese throughout their lives; and to suffer from obesity-related diseases.

To rub salt into the wound, as future taxpayers, these children could end up paying for more expensive healthcare when they grow up, as health systems come under increasing pressure to cover the rising cost of chronic diseases.

As policy makers and stakeholders, as parents and citizens, we therefore need to look at what more can be done to reverse this worrying trend.

Our EU Strategy on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related Health Issues of 2007, is a good example of the integrated approach that is needed.

And we can all take pride in the initiatives and accomplishments of the High-level group and of the Platform for action, to put this strategy into practice.

Let me recall a few examples:

Through the High-level Group, Member States have made great strides on the EU Framework for National Initiatives on Selected Nutrients.

This process started in 2008 with the initiative to reduce salt; and expanded in 2012, with the initiative to reduce saturated fat.

I hope Member States will soon agree to targets for the reduction of other nutrients of concern, as well as on portion sizes and consumption frequency of certain foods.

As regards the Platform for Action, it has honoured its name with 300 commitments for concrete action.

We have had excellent initiatives amongst these 300, such as the EU Pledge, whereby leading food and beverage companies have committed themselves not to advertise to children.

As with all our initiatives, the impact of the Platform needs to be measured by its results.

Based on your own reporting in 2013, however, the estimated investment on these commitments represents less than 0.05% of the total revenue of the Platform members.

The Platform can do better.

We know that not all the work can – or should – be measured in euros.

However, our common objective must be that everybody focuses attention and devotes the necessary resources to tackle obesity in Europe.

I realise that obesity is a problem with multiple causes. There is no single cause, and no magic solution for it.

Recognising the multiple dimensions of the problem, however, does not excuse inaction. It is rather a reason for a holistic approach.

Last year's evaluation of our Strategy on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related Health Issues stressed that children, physical activity and social inequalities should be targeted with greater care.

I would add that more joint commitments, better monitoring, increased communication and visibility are also part of the solution.

The Commission is of course keen to play its part to support Member States and stakeholders.

For example, the Commission is upgrading the EU School Milk Scheme and the School Fruit and Vegetables Scheme which already benefit 30 million children throughout Europe.

This year's reform of these schemes means that up to 15% of their budget can now be used to promote healthy diets amongst school children.

In other words, instead of just giving away fruit and vegetables for free in schools, the schemes will also invest in explaining why eating well matters.

And both the Horizon 2020, as well as the new EU Health Programme, support action on nutrition and physical activity.

Let me come back to childhood obesity.

I am pleased that last February an ambitious Action Plan on Childhood Obesity was agreed upon, which aims to halt the rise in childhood obesity in the EU by 2020.

This Plan is fully anchored in our Strategy, it is driven by the Member States, and seeks to support national policies to tackle childhood obesity.

I welcome that the action plan puts forward voluntary initiatives on a range of key areas:

- to support a healthy start in life; encouraging a healthy diet and physical activity;
- to promote healthier environments – especially in schools and preschools;
- to restrict marketing and advertising for children;
- to inform and empower families;
- and to increase research.

And because, as I said earlier, results are what matters most, a monitoring mechanism in this context is being devised with the collaboration of the WHO.

To help translate the action plan into reality, the Commission intends to support a Joint Action with Member States in this context, which would become operational as from 2015.

This action would help Member States to share good practices and develop tools on childhood obesity so as to deliver results, faster.

Finally, to conclude, let me say a few words on what lies ahead.

Unhealthy diets and lack of physical activity have a major impact on citizens' health and well-being, on national healthcare systems and their budgets, and on society as whole.

The good news is that most of all these negative outcomes are preventable.

If we do not take decisive action now, we will be asked by future generations why did we not act sooner and give more priority to this societal challenge.

We also know that both nutrition and physical activity are rife with inequalities.

Lower socio-economic status, physical inactivity, food and nutrition insecurity, and obesity are all linked.

In this context, our EU Strategy provides us the opportunity to scale up prevention policies.

We should probably move from “don'ts” to positive messages about how eating well helps children learn, play and develop their full potential in good health; about enjoying healthy food and having fun in physical activity.

At the same time, we need to pursue our efforts on reformulation of food, consumer information and labelling, portion sizes and the availability of the healthy option.

And we need to fight health inequalities by improving access to the ingredients, information and skills necessary for healthy lifestyles – across all EU policies.

I believe we can achieve better results by supporting Member States further in their efforts.

We can build on our achievements and be both more creative and more demanding.

The political will is there to keep up action on nutrition, obesity and physical activity.

In fact, this month, the Health Ministers of the European Union are due to adopt Council Conclusions expressing this political will; calling on Member States, the Commission and stakeholders to work further to address obesity and lack of physical activity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe we need to scale up and give more visibility to our coordinated actions on the risk factors of obesity so that we can deliver more and better results.

I warmly thank all members of the High-level Group and of the Platform for action, for the efforts made so far, and for your continued dedication and commitment.