

Tonio Borg

Member of the European Commission, responsible for Health

Commissioner Borg delivers speech on 'The need to tackle obesity'

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Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health, attends The Parliament Magazine event on "Addressing the burden of chronic diseases in the EU: The need to tackle obesity"

Brussels, Belgium, 15 October 2014

**"THE PARLIAMENT MAGAZINE" EVENT ON OBESITY:
'Addressing the Burden of chronic diseases in the EU: The need to
tackle obesity'**

**WEDNESDAY 15 OCTOBER, 18.30HRS -20.30HRS
BRUSSELS, EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

SPEECH

Honourable Dr Peterle,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here this evening to discuss with you action to fight obesity.

Over half of European adults are overweight or obese. Being overweight is now so common that it is becoming the new norm.

And perhaps even more of a worry, a generation of children with high prevalence of obesity is appearing before us:

- Many such children underperform at school;
- They risk having a lower quality of life now and in the future; and
- They are likely to remain obese throughout their lives.

As policy makers and stakeholders, as parents and citizens, we need to look at how to reverse this worrying trend.

At European level, we have, for a long time, been working together to promote healthy lifestyles:

- The Commission has endeavoured to promote healthy living across several policies, from agriculture to transport, from research to education;
- The European Parliament has been supportive with its own initiatives, and political and financial backing;
- The Council has addressed obesity in conclusions as recently as July of this year;
- The Member States have endorsed the Action Plan on Childhood Obesity earlier in February; and
- Industry and NGOs collaborating under the EU platform for action on diet, physical activity and health have presented over 300 commitments for action.

And still, obesity rates remain stubbornly high.

Plus, nutrition and physical activity are rife with inequalities. Lower socio-economic status, physical inactivity, and obesity are all linked. Breakfast and fruit consumption, both important for a healthy diet, are associated with income.

I believe this is a matter of great concern for EU citizens which calls for sustained, persistent, ambitious action.

Tackling obesity is a complex challenge; as obesity affects multiple, legitimate interests.

Successfully tackling obesity holds great untapped potential for improvements relevant for citizens, health systems and the economy as a whole.

I believe we have started on the right foot.

The 2007 Strategy on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related Health Issues stands as an example of the kind of integrated approach that we need to address obesity.

In implementing the Strategy, Member States have made great strides on the EU Framework for National Initiatives on Selected Nutrients.

It is in this context that Member States have been co-operating on reducing salt content since 2008, and on reducing saturated fat since 2012.

And more recently, in February, Member States have endorsed an ambitious Action Plan to halt the rise in childhood obesity by 2020.

This plan puts forward voluntary initiatives for example to support a healthy start in life; promote healthier environments – especially in schools and preschools; restrict marketing and advertising for children; and encourage physical activity.

In addition, the Commission has brought together the Member States in a new Joint Action to share good practices and develop tools on childhood overweight and obesity.

This Action is up and running until 2015 and is co-financed by the EU Health Programme.

Our work does not stop here.

The School Milk Scheme and the School Fruit and Vegetables Scheme are EU-wide programmes that help to improve the diets of more than 30 million children. Up to 15% of their budget can now be used to promote healthy diets with school children.

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

The Commission has been promoting joint collaboration with NGOs and industry under the EU platform for action on diet, physical activity and health – which, as I have mentioned, launched over 300 commitments for action.

I would like to mention in particular the EU Pledge, whereby leading food and beverage companies have committed themselves not to advertise to children.

However, the investment on these commitments represents less than 0.05% of the revenues of the industry. Not nearly enough.

Similarly, Member States devote small proportions of their health budgets to prevention and promotion.

Not all the work can – or should – be measured in euros.

I believe however that the right attention and the necessary resources must be devoted by all stakeholders to tackle obesity in Europe.

No doubt here in this room all agree that there are multiple causes to obesity; that the future consequences must to be minimized; that public actors must step up; and that industry must play a role. And that the results are not yet there.

If we can all agree on this, let us all also agree on doing more.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to conclude.

Obesity has a major impact on the personal lives of citizens, national healthcare budgets and on the economy as a whole. Much of such impact is preventable if we act now.

If we don't, we will be asked by future generations – as happened with tobacco and climate change – why did we not act sooner and give more priority to this massive societal challenge.

In this context, within the framework of the EU Strategy, an opportunity exists to scale up action on prevention.

We should also move from “don'ts” to more positive messages on protecting children, enjoying healthy food and having fun in physical activity.

At the same time, efforts on reformulation of food, consumer information and labelling, portion sizes and the availability of the healthy option need to be increased; and taken even more seriously by industry.

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

I believe we can achieve better results by supporting Member States in their efforts. The political will is there to step up action on nutrition, obesity and physical activity.

The time has come to build on the achievements of the past decade and be more demanding with ourselves, with all stakeholders. I hope that, by the end of the next Commission mandate, all together, we will have reversed the growing obesity trends in Europe.

Thank you.