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Commissioner Dalli delivers speech on 'Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity: The Way Forward'

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John DALLI, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, attends a EU Belgian Presidency High level conference on 'Strategies for nutrition, physical activity, overweight and obesity related health issues'.

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HOTEL BLOOM, BRUSSELS

NUTRITION, OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY: THE WAY FORWARD

SPEECH

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here today; to share with you how I see our future work on nutrition, overweight and obesity in the European Union and beyond.

Before I start, I would like to thank the Belgian Presidency for its leadership in putting this important issue high on the agenda and for organising this timely conference.

Indeed this year marks the half-way point of the Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity-related health issues.

Our task now is to build on our achievements so far; reflect on what we have learned and what more can we do; and keep the momentum going.

This conference has provided a unique occasion to discuss where the gaps are and how to fill them; and where to go forward from here.

My aim is to ensure that our joint work translates into concrete, positive and long-lasting results.

Let me start off by putting the issue of overweight and obesity into a broader context.

The Europe 2020 Strategy sets the path towards economic growth and how to emerge from the economic crisis in a stronger and, one might say, "fitter" condition.

We aim to foster the creation of a smart, sustainable and inclusive European economy delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion.

A fit and healthy population will play a key role in turning this aspiration into reality.

How can Europe deliver on its economic goals; with a workforce weakened by obesity-related diseases which lead to absenteeism, disability and early retirement?

Obesity is not just a cause of suffering for many Europeans. It is also an economic issue.

At a time of stretched resources, how will Europe afford the loss of human resources and increase in expenditure that obesity causes?

It is perhaps a paradox that despite all our progress in fighting so many diseases and epidemics, we are increasingly suffering from something relatively fundamental – overweight and obesity.

All of you in this room have a role to play: politicians, policy makers, industry, civil society, citizens.

The Commission's Strategy, adopted in 2007, set out an integrated EU approach to contribute to reducing ill-health due to poor nutrition, overweight and obesity.

During this conference, you have heard about real examples of activities related to the prevention of overweight and obesity in Europe and in other parts of the world.

Let me take this opportunity to stress that the European Commission is actively engaged in preventing overweight and obesity.

I was pleased to learn that the discussions in the working groups yesterday have led to fruitful exchanges of ideas and experience.

This shows how much we have to gain by working together.

I believe we need to continue in this direction – through collaborative efforts with our stakeholders in the EU Platform for action on diet, physical activity and health; with the Member States in the High Level Group; and with our partners around the world.

These two days have also shown there is still much work to be done. Your views are vital to us in shaping the way forward for the nutrition strategy.

Paola Testori Coggi presented to you yesterday the outcome of the progress report of the mid-term phase of the Strategy.

For me the report shows that we are on the right track; but there is still a long way to go to fight poor nutrition, overweight and obesity and what it does to people's health.

Obesity is on the rise Europe. We have to revert this trend.

I would like to **set an ambitious goal** for this work – to start to decrease the prevalence of obesity in the EU by 2013.

The question is how do we get there?

I believe we need to focus more on promoting healthy diets and physical activity for all EU citizens.

We need to focus on delivering on the objectives of the Strategy and on our commitments. Let me speak in concrete terms.

I would like to encourage the Member States - in the High Level Group on Nutrition and Physical Activity - to step up efforts in the area of reformulation of foods for fats and energy content.

I would like to see as a result that citizens have a greater choice of healthier food.

Your efforts in creating the EU Framework for national salt initiatives have clearly shown that this is possible. And I look forward to seeing you achieve your target of 16% reduction in salt content by 2013 as set out in this framework.

As regards stakeholders' work - in the context of the Platform - I was pleased to see that the evaluation published in July is quite positive; in particular on self-regulation initiatives in advertising to children and food reformulation.

The evaluation of the Platform also underlined the need to scale up and speed up efforts; if we want to see tangible results in the coming three years.

I encourage you to pursue and strengthen your efforts to ensure that healthy, nutritious food is available, affordable and attractive.

I am convinced that we need to be more creative in promoting physical activity, using a life-cycle approach – attracting everybody from small children to elderly people.

More efforts are also needed in food reformulation, portion size and food labelling – and also on reinforcing responsible marketing of food and drinks, in particular to children.

I therefore encourage Platform members to renew their commitments for 2011 – in a positive spirit of "scaling up"

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I would also recommend that you seek to develop synergies amongst your various activities to maximise their impact.

To ascertain whether or not our actions lead to results, we need the means to monitor their impact.

And this is why I hope we can establish a monitoring system by developing the capacity of the national nutritional counterparts in the WHO, whose contribution is essential in this respect.

I would like to take this opportunity to call on Member States to take up the obesity challenge heads on.

I believe a more focused and a more innovative approach to children, young people and low socio-economic groups is needed.

Obesity rates are higher among the poorer, who have fewer resources to make healthier food choices or to exercise. We must make sure that healthier food and physical activity become a real and affordable choice for all.

We would need all partners to think and work with us, to see how we can increase physical activity.

Schools should provide plenty of enjoyable opportunities for physical activity for every child, every day.

Schools should also provide the food and the environment that encourages and facilitates healthy choices and promotes a healthy weight.

The European Commission can contribute to this by fostering good practice exchange and by supporting national efforts.

However, this is an area where Member States need to invest resources, and to learn from each other.

The good examples you have heard about in the past two days show that this is possible.

I would like to challenge you all to step up your efforts in this area.

All the work that you do today to fight obesity is an investment for the future.

If we succeed in cutting childhood obesity today, Europeans will be much healthier in the years to come.

As this conference draws to a close, I would like to take this opportunity to thank once more the Belgian Presidency; and to invite the forthcoming Hungarian Presidency to build momentum to reduce obesity in Europe.

We have a difficult battle in our hands. Obesity is still winning. We need to fight back.

I know that this is easier said than done. There is no single cause of obesity; there is no single solution.

I am, however, convinced that we can succeed by working together.

- Working together to deal with food reformulation, responsible advertising and marketing;
- Working together to address vulnerable groups including children and young people; and
- Working together to pave the way towards a more active population.

I hope to be able to stand here in three years' time, looking back at our common achievements and celebrate with you our successful results.

Thank you.