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Commission of the European Communities

Green Paper

“Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases”

Response by the Wellcome Trust

March 2006

1. The Wellcome Trust welcomes the opportunity to respond to the questions raised by the Commission in its Green Paper on promoting healthy diets and physical activity. We are not well placed to answer many of the specific questions within the Green Paper. However, we would like to offer our response to the questions on: areas of further research needs, and improving availability and comparability of data on obesity.
2. The Wellcome Trust is an independent research-funding charity, established under the will of Sir Henry Wellcome in 1936. It is funded from a private endowment, which is managed with long-term stability and growth in mind. The Trust's mission is “to foster and promote research with the aim of improving human and animal health”. One way the Trust works to meet its mission is by stimulating an informed dialogue to raise awareness and understanding of biomedical science, its achievements, applications and implications. The Trust also seeks to provide the best available evidence and information in order to ensure that there is a good balance between the needs of research and those of society.
3. In December 2005, the Trust, working with partners in the UK Clinical Research Collaboration (UKCRC) held a consultation exercise to identify practical and achievable steps that could be taken forward by UK funding bodies, either collectively or individually, to move forward the research agenda in public health nutrition. The findings from this consultation exercise form the basis of our response and will inform further discussions within the UKCRC on the UK's public health research agenda.

On which areas related to nutrition, physical activity, the development of tools for the analysis of related disorders, and consumer behaviour is more research needed?

4. In terms of research related to nutrition, one area requiring further developmental work is in pre-trial designs, which identifies ‘what to measure’ as well as ‘how to measure’. For instance, new approaches and techniques to measure / assess dietary exposure, dietary intake and changes to intake (e.g. objective measures such as biomarkers), and dietary

compliance are necessary. There is a need for greater opportunities for researchers to carry out pilot studies which compare different approaches.

5. Further work is required on identifying effective interventions. In the past, intervention studies were often too small in scale to provide useful evidence. It is important that support is provided for research using reliable, validated methods and adequate sample size. There should also be provision for continuing follow-up studies to assess effectiveness once an intervention is implemented. Whilst there is a need for more primary intervention trials, there should be considerations of how well the US-based trials translate to European settings.
6. More work needs to be done on evaluating the effectiveness and efficacy of interventions aimed at promoting and maintaining well-being rather than reduction of illness measures. Greater support should be provided for evaluation of underlying mechanisms and process elements, as well as clinical outcomes, of interventions.
7. Nutrition intervention studies should be within a broader framework of research that can account for confounding influences as far as possible (e.g. study with clear and logical links to programmes aimed at changing patterns of physical activity, research linking genotype / metabolic / intervention studies employing multivariate techniques). Greater collaboration between nutritionists and behavioural scientists / psychologists is required. If a science base recommends an intervention, there should be sufficient study on whether the intervention in question can be translated into behaviour change before a large and expensive longitudinal study is carried out.
8. The consultation highlighted a need for greater support for secondary research, for instance: systematic review, secondary analysis, and wider evidence synthesis including economic and other modelling (e.g. complex socio-psychological models of dietary behaviour and behaviour change mechanism). Furthermore, new policy initiatives must be accompanied by rigorous evaluation.
9. In general, there needs to be a greater appreciation of the long-term, multidisciplinary and often costly nature of 'health promotion intervention' studies. More consideration should be given to what 'quality research' means if it is to act as an agent for change, as opposed to enhancing technical excellence or addition to the evidence base.

How can the availability and comparability of data on obesity be improved, in particular with a view to determining the precise geographical and socio-economic distribution of this condition?

10. The Commission could undertake research into what data is already being collected systematically across Europe and beyond, and make this information publicly available. Such research should analyse the quality and usability of the data being collected, as well as the possibility of data linkages.
11. There is a need for better systems for accessing detailed dietary data from cohorts, both nationally and internationally. Researchers should be encouraged to place primary data in the public domain in forms that promote collaboration and secondary analysis.
12. Funders could support researchers to develop agreed, systematic means of collecting, archiving and sharing data that is quality controlled in order to maximise the opportunities for combining datasets and for re-analysing datasets. More specifically for information on obesity the Commission could, through consultation, develop and promote standardised minimum datasets for routine collection.

13. Information from industry on dietary supplements, food composition, and food habits and trends would be of great benefit to researchers. The Commission could play a key role in promoting improved access or a centralised source for industrial data.

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