

To: SANCO-C4-NUTRITIONGREENPAPER@cec.eu.int

Response to Nutrition Greenpaper

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Introduction

In this response, I invite you to consider three important matters that seem to be slightly overlooked in most policies targeted at reducing obesity and related health risks.

Issue 1: Self-confidence

What most interventions seem to do is:

1. Scare people by stressing that they are maintaining very unhealthy behaviour that will lead to chronic and even deadly diseases. (In addition, society and marketeers will tell them over and over again that overweight people look ugly as well.)
2. Tell people how they are supposed to eat (because they can't figure that out themselves).
3. Solve the problems and answer the questions that people may have considering nutrition and diet (because it is obvious that they don't have the knowledge to figure out their own solutions).
4. When the problem grows (literally), point out that people lack knowledge and discipline. Which leads to the conclusion that a new, firmer intervention is necessary.

All of these actions (and related ones), will keep on LOWERING self-esteem and self-efficacy in individuals and society, when it comes to making choices about food and nutrition. And I wonder: have you ever seen a person make a change for the better, if he thinks he cannot do it?

I suggest that we start looking at ways to raise self-confidence when it comes to making personal choices about food and nutrition. In my daily practice, I use exercises to:

- let people distinguish between (physical) hunger, fancying a certain taste and a sense of restlessness in general
- help people discover when they are physically hungry and when they are not
- let people notice when they feel saturated
- give people logical ways of determining whether food is nutritious or not
- let people discover that when you really taste something, the taste already starts to get less interesting after a few bites
- help people decrease restlessness (or decrease the need to use food as an escape when they are restless)

In short, we help people to act normal again, when it comes to eating. They discover that they can really do it themselves, and they determine their own goals. This is what gets them moving.

Issue 2: Review our goals

Are we sure that weight is the real issue here? One of my colleagues seems to have found a reliable body fat analyzer. Often, a client comes in with a 'success story': "I have kept control over myself the past few days and I have hardly eaten anything - and now I've lost two kilo's!". Then she uses the body fat analyzer to show that this client now has a higher percentage of fat in his body - he has lost mostly liquids and muscle tissue. This sets him

straight, so she can start talking about healthy behavior that can last a lifetime (instead of extreme measures that will last a couple of weeks).

By now, we know that people who diet will usually end up fatter than they began, right? Not only their overall weight might be higher, but during their diet they will lose muscle tissue - and when they start putting on weight again, they will gain fat, not the muscles they lost.

In the Netherlands, we are constantly stimulated to lose weight. In my opinion, this is not the real goal. The real goal is that we all change to a healthy diet (and exercise more, but this is not my area of expertise). Then our weight will adjust automatically. By focussing on losing weight, we make people eat less. And unfortunately, they will start doing really weird things, like skipping meals, starve themselves for days, use only light products, or taking all kinds of pills and powders. And... (here I would like to agree with the Dutch Association for Obesity Patients) we stigmatize fat people as being 'wrong' and 'stupid'. This does not help, as I have pointed out in issue 1.

Issue 3: The benefits of maintaining weight problems

In my opinion it is important to be honest about obesity policy: there are many players who are interested in *maintaining* weight problems or even increasing them. First of all there is the companies that sell high calorie and/or thoroughly processed foods. You can only sell so much bread and veggies to a person, but when you start selling tasty snacks, the sky is the limit.

When people are scared (because they might get sick and are labelled unattractive), they are willing to take extreme measures. And pay for solutions. This is where a new range of products come in. We know how many 'solutions' for weight problems are offered, and how they are priced. And this includes 'light' products as well! "Please take this delightful snack that will provide you with loads of energy and no nutritional value - and then buy this light product beside it, that provides no energy *and* no nutritional value, so you can say that you've really tried to stay thin!" We are talking about a huge economic force here. Anyone who wants to help people truly solve their nutritional issues, has this force to work against. We can't really work together - so far, our goals are completely different. Why? Because most companies want people to gain weight and lose weight. They do *not* want people to solve their weight issues and start eating normally, because then they will stop buying half their products (if not more).

Questions that need answers

Questions that I would like to see researched thoroughly, are the following:

- What is the goal of most interventions in this area: let people lose weight, force them into a different way of eating, or truly solving weight and nutrition issues permanently?
- Does dietary information increase or decrease the self-confidence in people who are trying to make decisions about what they are going to eat?
- What methods are available to increase self-confidence in this matter, and how can they be scaled for large groups to benefit from them?
- Which ways are there to help people distinguish nutritious food from non-nutritious food, other than giving them a list that they have to follow?
- How many people have solved their weight and nutrition issues by taking low-calorie versions of their old products? Should these products be promoted as part of the solution?
- Is weight the right measure to focus on? Shouldn't that be body composition?
- Do advertisements and campaigns that promote slim bodies have a positive or a negative effect on the actions people take regarding health and nutrition?

I probably haven't been as thorough and complete as I would like to be. There is so much to say about this subject. However, I hope that I have provided you with some useful issues to think and talk about.

Kind regards,
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