

*Speech for Minister Áine Brady for Nutrition & Health Foundation Seminar
Food and Fitness – Practical Solutions to Obesity
6 October 2009*

Opening Remarks

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here today in my capacity as Minister for Older People and Health Promotion. I would like to thank Dr Muireann Cullen and the Nutrition and Health Foundation for inviting me here and giving me the opportunity to speak with you this morning.

Obesity – The Problem

There has been great progress in recent decades in tackling some of the more traditional killer diseases and there is no denying but that people are living longer. What is worrying is that these advances could be jeopardised by the rising prevalence of obesity and the lifestyle-related diseases associated with it. These conditions affect not only general well-being and quality of life but also account for an increasing share of healthcare resources. They will represent a significant economic burden for Ireland in the future. It is therefore little wonder that obesity has been described by the World Health Organisation as a ‘global epidemic’.

Childhood obesity is of particular concern. While it is reflective of what is happening across the wider population, the rising trend of obesity in children leads to a wide-range of serious health and social problems and reduces the average age at which diet-related diseases become apparent. Research has indicated that over 60% of children who are overweight before puberty will be overweight in early adulthood. A key concern that has been voiced is “Will this generation of obese children have a shorter life expectancy than their parents?”

Lifestyles and health

Lifestyles and health are intrinsically linked. The health status of the population is largely determined by factors outside of the health sector. If we are to improve the health of the nation, I believe that it is essential that health policy be co-ordinated with policies in other sectors including education, food production and processing, community and social, and sport and recreation. We need, at policy level, to take a more holistic approach to promoting, maintaining and improving health and we need to stimulate ideas for action in policy areas beyond the traditional health sector remit. In essence, we need to promote healthy lifestyles in a more co-ordinated manner.

Role of Industry

It is said that one’s health is one’s wealth and like all things precious, it needs to be guarded. There is, I feel, a growing awareness, not just among the general public, but within the food industry of the importance of healthy lifestyles and good nutrition. That is why events like today’s are so important.

However, despite this increased awareness, people are also notoriously resistant to change. Benjamin Franklin astutely advised “If you would persuade, appeal to interest and not reason.” Promoting better lifestyles and behaviour changes across the population is a valuable and important task. Industry can take a leaf from Franklin’s

book and play a key role in this regard. Whether it is through research and development or through the promotion of healthy and appealing food choices, industry can help mould and shape the preferences of consumers.

Product reformulation is one approach the EU Commission are taking to persuade people to eat more healthily. Initial efforts have concentrated on salt reduction, and Ireland has signed up to the EU Framework on Salt Reduction, aiming to achieve the benchmark reduction of 16% over a four year timeframe across four major food categories - bread, meat products, cheeses and ready meals. We expect that further initiatives, aimed at reducing the levels of fat and sugar in products will be developed. Just as with the salt initiative, I look forward to your continued co-operation in any new initiatives.

Physical Activity

Unfortunately we can't eat ourselves slim. Just like a balance sheet with its debits and credits, physical activity has to be factored into our energy equation. During the summer I launched *National Guidelines on Physical Activity*. These were developed by a steering group lead by the Department of Health and Children and HSE, and I know Maria Lordan-Dunphy will speak in more detail on the Guidelines later this morning. The Guidelines, aimed primarily at those involved in promoting health and physical activity, emphasise the importance of physical activity to overall health and well-being. They give clear information on the recommended levels of physical activity for the general population, while also providing specific recommendations on physical activity for children, young people, adults, older people and disabled people. This information has also been made available to the public through what is in my view a very well-designed and user-friendly website – ***get Ireland active.ie***.

Inter-sectoral Group on Obesity

Many of you will be familiar with the work of the Inter-sectoral Group on Obesity. It was set up to review progress on the implementation of the recommendations of the National Taskforce on Obesity and to oversee and monitor their implementation. The group brings together representatives of all key stakeholders, including experts from Government Departments and agencies, the food industry and relevant NGOs. The food industry is ably represented on the Group by Dr Muireann Cullen, NHF and Mr Shane Dempsey, Food & Drinks Industry Ireland, both of whom will be addressing today's seminar. The Inter-sectoral Group provides an ideal forum in which stakeholders can work together to help find practical, workable solutions to problem of obesity.

Indications of Positive Change

Small changes in lifestyle behaviours can help to influence the prevalence or otherwise of overweight and obesity. There are some positive indications of progress in this regard on the horizon, which I hope augur well for the future.

Findings from a survey commissioned by HSE and Safefood, to measure the success of the "*Little Steps*" media campaign, found that children are exercising more and spending less time in front of television or playing computer games. More parents say that they practise what they preach when it comes to family health. The survey reveals that in a typical week 65% of children are now walking to destinations other than school – up from 59% in May 2008. Almost 7 in 10 children say they are eating

more fruit and vegetables, with 59% saying that they are now consuming less junk or convenience food.

Conclusion

With proper information, encouragement and support, people can control many of the factors that influence their health and learn to take greater personal responsibility for their own well-being. The Government will continue to support efforts to create greater awareness around the positive lifestyle behaviours which help people stay in shape and allow them live healthier lives. I am confident that by working together we can tackle the problem. We must continue to be relentless in promoting healthy lifestyle behaviours across the population.

Once again, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today.

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