

A tax on sugar is the bitter pill that is needed

July 14 2015, by Andrew Gould



In a week when the British Medical Association has called for a sugar tax of 20 per cent to be introduced to help combat the nation's obesity epidemic, Dr Gail Rees, Associate Professor in Human Nutrition at

Plymouth University School of Biomedical and Healthcare Sciences, argues that this is a sensible suggestion because obesity – directly and indirectly – is a concern for us all.

The British Medical Association has called a 20 per cent [tax](#) on sugar because, according to its figures, poor diets are causing around 70,000 premature deaths each year.

The BMA suggests that the extra revenue – would amount to 13p on each can and 37p on each two-litre bottle of fizzy drink sold – should be used to make fruit and vegetables cheaper.

According to some figures, the average Briton consumes an astounding 238 teaspoons of sugar a week – that's more than one kilo. But if you asked the majority of the population how much sugar they ate the amount would be much lower: this is because so much of our western, processed diet contains hidden levels of the stuff.

And it's not just in the obvious culprits, such as fizzy drinks and confectionery. Sugar is lurking in any number of seemingly innocuous everyday foodstuffs, such as canned tomatoes, salad dressings, peanut butter, breakfast cereals, bread, pasta – the list goes on.

A tax on sugar may sound draconian, but a study published in the *British Medical Journal* showed that it would have a benefit. The study estimated that a tax of 20 per cent would lead to a reduction in the prevalence of [obesity](#) in the UK of 1.3 per cent (around 180 000 people). It showed that the greatest effects may occur in young people, with no significant differences between income groups. Its authors said that: "taxation of sugar sweetened drinks is a promising population measure to target population obesity, particularly among younger adults."

The charity Sustain, which advises the government on food and farming

issues, says that people in the UK consume more than 5,727 million litres of [sugary soft drinks](#) a year, and that adding a 20 per cent tax to every litre sold would raise more than £1.1 billion – which could be used to improve many aspects of the health of the nation.

Similar taxes in other countries, such as the sugary drinks tax in Mexico, have been shown to work.

Unsurprisingly, the suggestion that sugar should be taxed has not been welcomed in all quarters. The Food and Drink Federation argues that such a tax would hit the poorest families at a time when they can least afford it, while others question whether those who maintain a healthy diet and lifestyle should be taxed to mitigate the lifestyles of those who don't.

My argument is a simple one: whether we are directly or indirectly affected by obesity, at the end of the day it is everyone's problem and we should all be worried about it.

Obesity places an enormous burden on the NHS and other social services. Some estimates show that as much as 30 per cent of the UK population will be obese by 2030.

Take diabetes as an example. Not all incidences of diabetes are caused by obesity or an unhealthy lifestyle, but the vast majority are. According to the Impact Diabetes report, the cost of treating diabetes will rise from £9.8 billion to £16.9 billion in 25 years' time – which will equate to 17 per cent of the total NHS budget.

Treatment for cardiovascular disease, another condition exacerbated by obesity, costs the UK health system around £9 billion.

The cost implications of obesity are not just confined to [health care](#)

[expenditure](#) – there are ramifications for the wider economy too.

In 2011, for which the most up to date statistics from the Office for National Statistics are available, 131 million days were lost to UK businesses through absences due to sickness and many of those illnesses can be linked to obesity. According to the CBI, absence from work through sickness is costing the UK £14 billion a year.

But the argument for a tax on sugar to help curb obesity is about more than money saving: it is about improving the health of the nation in general.

We are, on average, living for longer. As a consequence, our bodies and our good health need to last us for many years more than in previous generations. Good diet, exercise and a healthy lifestyle adopted from an early age holds us in good stead for healthier, more active later years. Not only does this mean a pleasanter later life experience for us as individuals, it also means that as we age we become less of a potential burden on those around us and the services designed to support us.

If the UK was to introduce a tax on sugar it would not be the first country in the world to do so – other nations, such as France, Finland and Hungary have already placed taxation on sweetened beverages.

Obesity in the UK is at a very high level and if it continues to increase at its current rate the outlook for the health of the nation is, without exaggerating the threat, scary. The very fact that the BMA is suggesting a tax on sugar is indicative of how seriously the issue is taken by those at the very highest levels. We need to look at lots of different approaches to the problem: a tax on [sugar](#) is just one of those approaches and, in my view, a sensible one to adopt.

Provided by University of Plymouth

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