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The Business Times
No magic bullet to reducing childhood obesity
5 February 2016
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IN the article "Time to bring sugar into the 'sin tax' net" (BT, Feb 1), Vikram Khanna labelled sugar "a health hazard" and the root cause of obesity and non-communicable diseases. He also suggested that perhaps a sugar-sweetened tax is the intervention to reduce incidents of obesity, basing his opinion on comments made in the World Health Organisation's Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO) report published last week.

While the ECHO report does state that "there is sufficient rationale to warrant the introduction of an effective tax on sugar-sweetened beverages", it also clearly articulates that "no single intervention can halt the rise of the growing obesity epidemic". Also, the report highlights that "only a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach can stem the rise of obesity", which was not addressed in the article.

The co-chairs of the report, Sir Peter Gluckman and Dr Sania Nishtar, have commented in Newsweek and elsewhere that "there is no magic bullet" to solve the obesity problem.

Sir Peter emphasised in his comments at the launch of the report that childhood obesity was a multi-factorial issue - biological, behavioural, environmental, contextual and social - which means that there is no magic bullet, but a need to act on all factors at once.

Food Industry Asia (FIA) supports the view that obesity is a multi-factorial issue and that a solution needs input and commitment from the industry and other stakeholders that are grounded in evidence-based science to make informed decisions.

Food and non-alcoholic beverages, which are the bulk of the products that would fall under the proposed "sin tax" on sugar, are fundamentally different from other taxable products, such as alcohol and tobacco. These distinctions should be made clear. For example, these differences make food and non-alcoholic beverages inappropriate products for selective excise duties.

First, food and non-alcoholic beverages are not harmful to health. There is a clear and important distinction between products which invariably generate harm to health, and those for which the impact of consumption would depend on a number of factors.

Second, food and non-alcoholic beverages are not luxury goods; they generally account for an important share of the budget of low- and middle-income consumers. There is evidence that introducing a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages is regressive, since the poorest consumers spend a greater proportion of their income on food and non-alcoholic beverages than wealthier households.

To date, many scientific studies suggest the effectiveness of such taxes in discouraging consumption of foods and non-alcoholic beverages high in fat, sugar and salt is still uncertain.

Taxes are too narrow a tool to address the critical public health concerns at hand. The results in countries where these taxes have been introduced are still uncertain. Their limited effectiveness is principally a result of food taxes not reducing the number of calories consumed, but simply shifting consumption patterns.

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Uncertainty about food taxes

For example, the so-called "fat tax" created in 2011 by the Danish government to address the country's rising obesity rates was criticised for leading to job losses, increasing administrative burdens for companies and creating cross-border shopping. The tax was eventually scrapped the following year and the planned extension of the chocolate tax was cancelled.

Likewise, Finland introduced a tax on confectionery and ice cream in 2012 in an effort to curb sugar consumption. While initial sales of confectionery products dropped slightly, by the end of 2013, long-term sales had returned to pre-tax levels. In September 2015, the Finnish government announced it would abolish the tax from 2017.

One of the most comprehensive reviews of academic research in this area showed that a tax would have uncertain consumption outcomes at best, and concluded that we do not know how a population would respond to a tax on foods. An academic review of a report published in France also noted that "the impact of taxes in reducing the consumption of nutritionally poor foods is uncertain. While the goals may be laudable (though this is questionable), there is a major risk of applying additional constraints on economic activity without getting the expected public health benefits".

Nor is there enough evidence to show that food taxation will achieve behavioural change or improve consumers' access to healthier foods. To date, fiscal policies such as taxes and subsidies have been driven primarily by a need to raise revenue rather than to change people's behaviour.

In the OECD's 2012 Obesity Update, the authors concluded that it is difficult to predict how consumers will react to price changes caused by taxation. Some consumers may respond by reducing their consumption of healthy goods in order to pay for the more expensive unhealthy goods, thus defeating the purpose of the tax.

A holistic approach

In January 2014, the Mexican government levied a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages and on high-caloric-density foods. The tax of one peso per litre on sugar-sweetened beverages increased the retail price of such products by nine to 19 per cent. Introduced as a measure to reduce obesity, this intervention does not appear to have made a meaningful impact in the caloric intake of the Mexican population.

For example, the calorie consumption from beverages has declined only slightly - six fewer calories per day in a diet of more than 3,000 calories per day. In addition, a recent study evaluating the effects of the tax on price and consumption found that "although the price of calories increased by close to 4 per cent, the quantity of calories consumed decreased by about 1 per cent only". Although the results are preliminary, the study also found "evidence (which) shows that the effects of the Mexican taxes on calories consumed in-home are very small".

Tom Sanders, emeritus professor of nutrition and dietetics at King's College, commenting in the *New Scientist* this week, stated that evidence of the impact of Mexico's tax on sugar-sweetened beverages is underwhelming, citing the details just published in the *British Medical Journal*.

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According to this report, purchases of taxed sugar-containing beverages fell by 12 ml per head per day and those of untaxed beverages (including fruit juice) increased by 36 ml/head/day. The fall in taxed beverages was greater in the poorest households, at 35 ml/head/day, but even this is only equivalent to about 1 sugar cube (16 kcal) - a drop in the caloric ocean.

FIA believes that the more effective measures (with long-term impact) to combat obesity are those aimed at influencing the behaviour and habits of the population, which can be achieved with comprehensive policy actions and public education, prevention and promotion of healthy lifestyles.

From an industry perspective, this entails product reformulation, portion control, restrictions on the marketing of certain foods and beverages to children, promotion of nutrition literacy and labelling and public education on diet and the importance of physical activity - all of which are likely to be more effective than a recommendation on taxing sugar-sweetened beverages. Further work should be undertaken to assess the impact of fiscal measures on diet, obesity and public health within a country-specific context before reaching conclusions.

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