



# THE BRITISH DIETETIC ASSOCIATION

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## The British Dietetic Association's Response to *Choosing Health:* *Making Healthier Choices Easier*

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The British Dietetic Association welcomes the Government's White Paper, entitled *Choosing Health: Making Health Choices Easier*.

The long awaited White Paper, on improving public health in England, was published on 16<sup>th</sup> November by Health Secretary, John Reid.

*Choosing Health* was produced following a lengthy period of consultation, and addresses a wide range of health issues; nutrition and diet are integral to many of the issues highlighted. Consequently, dietitians will have a key role to play in the delivery and promotion of the healthy lifestyle featured in the White Paper.

The key issues covered by the White Paper include measures on tobacco smoking, sensible alcohol drinking, sexual health and mental well-being, as well as a raft of measures to tackle obesity and to encourage and facilitate choosing a balanced diet. The need for the Government to work in partnership with others, to help create an environment that promotes health and reflects the realities of living in England in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, is central to the measures set out in the document.

The overarching aim is to improve public health by:

- ◆ Making it easier for people to make healthier choices;
- ◆ Protecting people's health from the actions of others; and
- ◆ Recognising the particular needs of children and young people.

There are clearly no obvious simple, quick solutions and the BDA welcomes the opportunity to work in partnership with other organisations, looking to Government to lead and promote partnerships with other players, to engage constructively in a shared effort and to 'market health' with action linked to activities in the community, schools and workplaces.

In terms of diet and nutrition, the specific areas of tackling obesity (in particular childhood obesity) clearer food labelling and curbs on the promotion of foods to children, are highlighted in the report. Although there are a number of proposed policies outlined, action to take these forward will be taken a step further through a Food and Health Action Plan, expected to be launched in spring 2005.

## **Obesity**

Obesity has increased significantly in the last 20 years, among both adults and children; the most recent data show that over half of the adult population is classified as being overweight, and obesity affects 1 in 5 people. Dietitians have a unique role to play in combating and helping to prevent obesity. The BDA welcomes this early focus, outlined in the White Paper, for a new cross-Government campaign to raise awareness of the health risks of obesity and the steps that people can take to prevent obesity. Future campaigns, jointly funded by Government and industry, must be based on good evidence; successful campaigns are recognised as those that reach people via a range of sources, actively and consistently promoting health and using consistent messages (e.g. the 5-a-day campaign).

By 2007, the White Paper proposes that NICE (National Institute of Clinical Excellence) will prepare definitive guidance on the prevention, identification, management and treatment of obesity. Responsibility for preventing and treating obesity lies with the whole of society, from individuals to the NHS, education services, the food industry, leisure services, commercial organisations and the Government. Consequently, action needs to be well co-ordinated with multi-agency programmes in place to help treat and prevent obesity. Obesity needs to be recognised as a chronic disease, requiring lifelong management. Weight management programmes must incorporate weight maintenance strategies.

The BDA supports the proposals to implement a comprehensive care pathway for prevention and treatment through the suggested range of new initiatives, including; support tools for NHS staff to assess risk of overweight and obesity, guidance on weight loss, advice on practical action to prevent obesity through diet and physical activity, and work with the independent sector to develop effective approaches to support behaviour change. Funding also needs to be available for research and to guide and implement effective, concerted action.

Dietitians are already involved in a number of initiatives, but in order to maximize the potential of this highly skilled workforce, the BDA considers that there is a need for:

- ◆ A specialist public health post, created within Primary Care Trusts, that will harness the skills and qualities of dietitians and enable them to work with others in an effective way to prevent obesity and develop effective and co-ordinated strategies for obesity management;
- ◆ A dietetic adviser at the Department of Health; and
- ◆ A public health dietetic post at regional level.

It is essential that the commitments made in the White Paper are set in motion so that strong evidence from past debates on obesity do indeed create 'irreversible momentum for change'.

## **Communicating messages about health**

The BDA recognises the need for clear and consistent messages about health that are co-ordinated and in step with the way that people actually live. Health professionals are seen as credible sources of advice and there is a need to ensure that the public are not presented with conflicting advice reported in the media. The proposed National Centre for Media and Health would be useful to ensure that independent scientists and practitioners from a wide range of health backgrounds are available to provide accurate and impartial information to the media on a full range of health issues.

Advice from registered dietitians is practical and reliable and based on current scientific evidence; dietitians are a key source of information about food and nutrition.

## **Labelling Food**

Labelling is one of the key areas on diet and nutrition in the White Paper, with a call to simplify labelling, and to make it mandatory on all packaged foods. The goal is that by 2006 there will be a clear and straightforward coding system in common use, which busy people can understand at a glance.

The BDA welcomes the call for clearer labelling of foods. Consumers need clear and accurate information on which to base healthier food choices. However, it is important to develop systems that don't confuse but support people to make healthier and balanced choices (rather than increase concern about what constitutes eating for health). The Department of Health has already started working with the Food Standards Agency to develop criteria, in relation to fat, sugar and salt content, to indicate the contribution that foods make to a balanced diet. New research published on 25 November 2004 by the Food Standards Agency looks at five signposting concepts, the FSA will now be testing all these options by working with the food industry, and work is planned to be completed by summer 2005.

Of major importance is that any such actions e.g. 'traffic light food guide labelling', are seen as small steps. No single action in isolation will solve the multi-factorial problem of obesity, or automatically ensure that a balanced diet is achieved, and simplified food labelling schemes should not be seen as quick-fixes or easy answers. They must be part of a long term, multi-agency strategic approach, which also takes in to account the need to advocate a diet which also provides a full complement of essential micronutrients. Recent surveys have highlighted that a number of micronutrients are lacking in the diets of some subgroups in the population, for instance, total iron intakes were frequently shown to fall below the lower reference nutrient intake for a considerable proportion of pre-menopausal women in the latest National Diet and Nutrition Survey (Henderson *et al.* 2003). The Government is in an ideal position to take the lead on coordinating this action.

The role of the food industry is also well recognised and the White Paper calls for industry to build on the commitments that food retailers and producers have already made towards promoting a balanced diet, specifically in 4 areas: product development, labelling information, promotion and pricing, and customer information and advice.

The BDA supports the aims proposed in the White Paper for discussions between the food industry, health ministers and the Food Standards Agency to promote positive health information and education, as well as the specific discussions on:

- ◆ Increased availability of 'healthier' food, including a reduction in levels of fat, sugars and salt in prepared and processed food and drink, and improved access to fruit and vegetables;
- ◆ Reversing the trend towards bigger portion sizes (on which moves are already being made by some companies);
- ◆ Adopting consistent and clear standards for information on foods, including signposting;
- ◆ Long-term, and interim, targets for reducing sugar and fat content in different categories of foods; and
- ◆ Ensuring use of a national food guide, such as the Balance of Good Health, together with guidance on quantities and portion sizes to ensure consistent educational messages about choosing a healthy, balanced diet.

## **Focus on Children and Young People**

One of the core principles of the White Paper is that of informed choice, with the Government providing support by creating the right environment. A special qualification in this was to exercise special responsibility for children who are too young to make informed choices. Consequently, one of the targets outlined was food promotion to children. By 2007 a strategy is expected to restrict advertisement and promotion to children of foods high in fat, salt and sugar. Given the findings of a report commissioned by the Food Standards Agency, which concluded that *'food promotion can have and is having an effect on children, particularly in areas of food preferences, purchase behaviour and consumption'*, new measures on the advertising and promotion of foods to children will be monitored to assess their impact. Building the evidence base is essential. Recent OFCOM research concluded that there is a need for some specific and targeted tightening of the current restrictions on food promotion to children, in the context of other changes, but also recognised that a total ban on TV advertising of food and drinks to children would neither be proportionate nor effective in isolation. Conversely, Government is keen to see industry seek additional creative positive campaigns to promote healthy lifestyles, a move which is already being explored by some. The White Paper states that *'action needs to be comprehensive and taken in relation to all forms of food advertising and promotion, including broadcast, non-broadcast, sponsorship & brand-sharing, point of sale advertising including vending in schools, and labels, wrappers & packaging'*. One suggestion is that advertisements, for foods that are high in fat, sugar or salt, should be banned both during children's programming and at other times when large numbers of children are watching. The BDA considers that:

- ◆ There needs to be more balance in advertising - the environment should be one that both allows and encourages healthy choices, making them the easy and desirable ones;
- ◆ The advertising of less healthy foods to younger children should be banned or, at the very least, limits should be placed on the number of less healthy foods advertised to children of all ages;
- ◆ Child friendly packaging on 'healthy' options should be considered;
- ◆ Peer pressure may be a problem for parents as well as children, for example when preparing a school lunch box. The food industry should be encouraged to provide attractive healthy foods, which appeal to children;
- ◆ Advertisers should be discouraged from using celebrities, toys or gimmicks to promote less healthy foods and/or excessive consumption e.g. 'meal deals', 'all you can eat', refills, buy extra and get a free gift;
- ◆ There should be attempts to make the healthy alternatives financially advantageous. In short the healthy choice should be the easy choice – both accessible and affordable; and
- ◆ Lessons should be learned from intelligence on marketing, to support and promote a balanced diet which contains a full complement of micronutrients essential for a growing child.

The BDA agrees that starting children and young people on the right path is essential and welcomes the attention given to this in the White Paper. The proposed 'Healthy Start' which is to be launched in 2005, providing disadvantaged pregnant women and mothers of young children with vouchers for fresh fruit and vegetables, milk and infant formula, will make a major contribution towards this.

Other key agencies within the White Paper charged with advising on nutrition for young children are the current Surestart programmes and emerging Children's centres. These are seen as key to influencing the health of children below school age and their families. It is important to note that many Surestart programmes already have input from dietitians and other colleagues who have developed effective activities to promote the importance of a balanced diet in this age group. In addition, they have developed training and support for other workers. It is important that these programmes develop clear guidelines for food provision within these settings.

Schools are recognised as key players in public health partnerships and will be tasked with providing healthier meals, free fruit and vegetables, and sport, both within and outside school hours. The BDA welcomes the proposed revision in standards for school meals and supports the introduction of nutrient-based standards.

The whole school approach to healthy eating (using a national food guide) is key to providing consistent messages about a balanced diet. A coherent and comprehensive policy within schools is important, including healthy catering, healthy tuck shops and vending machines, and the provision of water and breakfast to children. Additionally, the curriculum should include not only the theoretical benefits of healthy eating but also practical cooking skills and budgeting sessions. Support should be given to schools so that financial factors do not stop them giving clear, unambiguous messages about a balanced diet. Proposals to put into place a comprehensive package, to assist schools across England in implementing the whole school approach to healthy eating and drinking, which is fully integrated into the Healthy Schools Standards, is welcomed.

Considerable amounts of work have already been carried out and the BDA considers that there is a need to build on, and take forward, the work of the Food Standards Agency and others for nutritional standards to be developed throughout the public sector, in addition to schools. Workplaces also need to be able to reduce barriers to improving health and the BDA, as an employer and an organisation representing employees in the NHS, as well as those working for other employers, recognises the need to promote a more healthful working environment. The NHS should provide a model of good practice as an employer.

### **Alcohol**

Although many people enjoy moderate amounts of alcohol as part of a balanced diet, the BDA welcomes the focus given to responsible drinking in the White Paper. Through collaboration with the Portman Group, the Government will seek to curb binge drinking. There is a need for Government to work with alcoholic drink manufacturers to develop a voluntary social responsibility scheme. Such a scheme would strengthen rules on the advertising of alcohol, particularly advertisements aimed at underage drinkers, would feature information on alcohol containers and in alcohol retail outlets, and would include reminders about sensible drinking. Clearer guidelines on alcohol consumption are needed to highlight the dangers of binge drinking.

### **Physical Activity**

In relation to physical activity, the BDA welcomes the promotion of increased activity. It is clear that a significant proportion of the population is becoming increasingly inactive and there is a societal shift towards sedentary behaviour, for example using the car and watching TV. Free diet and fitness regimens to help keep people fit and healthy would be useful; dietitians should have input into the development and implementation of such schemes to ensure the best possible advice is given. Facilities for leisure should be encouraged to promote consistent messages in relation to diet and exercise.

## **Support for healthier choices – NHS Health Trainers**

The White Paper recognises that people are ambitious for their family's health, but this is, at times, difficult to put into sustained action. The BDA considers the proposed NHS Health Trainers and Personal Health Kits could fill a much-needed role in supporting people as they make healthier choices. NHS Health Trainers will be drawn from local communities, and accredited by the NHS, to provide support for those who want help to make, and stick to, healthier choices. The BDA are pleased to learn from the Department of Health that dietitians will be key players during the development of programmes used to train the Health Trainers. It is equally important that structures are put in place at local level to ensure quality in the delivery of this service, accompanied by robust evaluation methods which will measure outcomes and ultimately the effectiveness of this new initiative. Recognising that one size does not fit all, Personal Health Kits will be used to help individuals to develop a tailored health guide, including online guidance and tailored advice, using a variety of different types of support from the NHS to develop personal health goals.

## **Dietitians – key to delivery of Choosing Health**

Registered dietitians in the UK hold the only legally recognised graduate qualification in nutrition and dietetics and work to promote nutritional well-being, treat disease and prevent nutrition-related health problems. Their unique skill is to interpret and translate the science of nutrition into practical, impartial and safe information about food and health. Therefore they have a key role to play in the implementation of the recommendations made in the White Paper, particularly in relation to the promotion of a healthy diet and preventing and treating obesity. In terms of obesity their training provides them with an understanding of the causes, consequences and treatment strategies (including dietary approaches, physical activity, behaviour change skills, drug treatment and surgery). They understand the public health issues in addition to the clinical implications of disease. Dietitians do not see their role as solely managing those who are overweight/obese, but also have a role in working within PCTs to help develop strategic approaches, involving all agencies (leisure services, slimming clubs, local government, schools, workplace, minority groups and those from lower socio-economic groups) to improve the health of their population as a whole.

Ends.

**Reference:**

Henderson I, Gregory J, Irving K *et al.* (2003) The National Diet and Nutrition Survey: Adults Aged 19-64 years, Volume 3: Vitamin and Mineral Intake and Urinary Analysis. HMSO, London.

**Notes**

1. The full report is accessible from the Department of Health web site, [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk) downloadable by individual chapters. Chapter 1 - time for action on health and health inequalities; Chapter 2 - health in the consumer society; Chapter 3 - children and young people ; Chapter 4 - local communities leading for health; Chapter 5 - health as a way of life; Chapter 6 - a health-promoting NHS; Chapter 7 - work and health; Chapter 8 - making it happen, national and local delivery; Choosing Health: Executive Summary; Annex A - choosing health? Consultation; Annex B - making it happen.
2. The British Dietetic Association, founded in 1936, is the professional Association for registered dietitians in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is the nation's largest organisation of food and nutrition professionals with over 5,000 members. About two-thirds of members are employed in the National Health Service. The remaining members work in education, industry, research, sport settings or freelance.
3. Registered dietitians hold the only legally recognised graduate qualification in nutrition and dietetics. They are experts in interpreting and translating the science of nutrition into practical ways of promoting nutritional well-being, disease treatment and the prevention of nutrition-related problems. Their advice is sound and based on current scientific evidence.
4. Registration, awarded by the Health Professionals Council, is an indication that a dietitian is fit to practise and is working within an agreed statement of conduct.
5. For further details about the British Dietetic Association, please visit our Website: [www.bda.uk.com](http://www.bda.uk.com)
6. Also, see our Weight Wise website with some great information put together by registered dietitians specifically for consumers at: [www.bda-weightwise.com](http://www.bda-weightwise.com)