



Simon Harris, Minister for Health

Picture: Bryan Meade



The fat of the MATTER

Sugar, lack of exercise, processed food, evil industries intent on filling us with empty calories – all have been blamed for the fact that we’re getting fatter. But in this open letter to the new Minister for Health, one of Ireland’s leading obesity experts, Professor **Mike Gibney** of UCD, urges Simon Harris to eschew simplistic solutions such as a sugar tax and advertising bans, and finally give this complex, multi-faceted problem the attention it deserves

Dear Minister,

A new government and a new minister bring with them a high level of expectation of change. In no time, queues will be forming at every corner of your new desk, each championing some cause, each of them important and worthwhile.

I will be in the obesity queue, alongside all those who want to tackle what the World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies as a global epidemic. Alongside

me in that queue will be a substantial number of people who also want to bend your ear: primary food producers, both conventional and organic; retailers, both national and global; the catering sector; the healthcare sector; local entrepreneurs; global brands, and vocal non-governmental organisations.

Across the way, in other queues that will form to seek your attention, will be our first cousins – diabetes, heart disease, mental health and low self esteem – who in many ways could stand here, beside us, under the obesity umbrella.

My wish, in writing this letter, is to lay out the key issues that you will encounter, and to give you my personal views, which are supported by 40 years of leading research in the area of nutrition and body weight.

Mike Gibney,
Professor of
Food and Health
at UCD

Picture:
Fergal Phillips

Let me start by stating that all of us in this queue care passionately about the issue of obesity, which is both a global and national problem, and which ranks as the fifth leading cause of illness globally, according to the WHO.

There is much overlap in the analysis of the problem; indeed, there is much overlap in terms of the best road to take to tackle obesity. These views are not unanimous, and that is a good thing. As has been pointed out, unanimity of opinion may be fitting for religion and political organisation, but it has no role in science.

But while dissent is the oxygen of science, the problem of obesity must be addressed on a solid scientific basis, and must at all times be evidence-driven. As Peter Medawar, the Nobel Laureate



in immunology, puts it: “The intensity with which a hypothesis is held to be true has no bearing on its validity.” Which is really just another way of saying that because you really believe something and want it to be true, that doesn’t make it true.

Validity and evidence must at all times drive this issue, yet when it comes to obesity, myths abound – about miracle cures, wonder foods and every elixir of hope imaginable promoted by charlatans and pseudo-scientists. Regrettably, many of those mythical beliefs are commonly held – including, I suspect, by many of the people sharing the obesity queue with me. So let me briefly highlight some of these common misconceptions.

Let’s start with sugar, and the veritable sugar jihad being waged in today’s media. Based on national

data, our average sugar intake as a percentage of calories has not changed in the last 20 years, yet we are told that today’s obesity epidemic can be blamed on sugar.

These figures also hold true for the US, Canada, Britain, Australia and New Zealand, where the cuisine is broadly similar to ours. How, then, can an obesity epidemic be blamed on a single nutrient, the intake of which has either remained constant or not changed globally?

Sugar-bashing is the latest in a long line of nutritional fads championed by writers of bestselling books built on highly-biased simplistic analysis of the problem. We saw more over-simplistic thinking last week, with the claims made by Britain’s National Obesity Forum that carbs are bad and fats are good.

No human experiment that I am aware of supports this war cry against sugar or carbs, and indeed two major British studies last year, executed by the best in the field, found that real people, eating real foods, in properly-designed studies all did better as regards blood cholesterol when fat intakes were optimised with no drastic reduction in carbs.

Both sets of authors concluded that optimising the type of fats eaten – in other words, avoiding saturated fat and instead eating appropriate, but not excessive amounts of monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats – along the lines recommended for the last four decades, would lower heart disease by about 25 per cent.

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