

Healthy Cities

In our first Healthy Cities report, *Diabetes Voice* highlights municipal and national governing policies that are trailblazing new directions for human health.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg has dominated his mayoral terms with strong government leadership providing unconventional initiatives for New York City's public health problem. His controversial policies have gained worldwide acknowl-

edgement and support from a distinguished list of international leaders and influential scholars. We briefly review his extraordinary final term and present supporting words from another New York City resident, Marion Nestle, Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University. Winds of change and fresh air are also moving across other regions in North America. In an interview with members of Mexico's Health Secretariat, we learn about the city's

The new health revolution: New York City

Elizabeth Snouffer

A healthy city is one that is continually creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources which enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and developing to their maximum potential.

WHO, Health Promotion Glossary (1998):

WHO's Healthy Cities programme is a long-term international development initiative that places public health 'high on the agendas of decision makers in order to promote comprehensive local strategies for health protection and sustainable development'. Focussing on cities that represent the best of community participation and empowerment, and intersectoral partnerships creating a health-supportive environment, in our

first 'healthy cities' instalment, we praise the efforts of Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City, who has forced change on issues related to public health, including tobacco cessation, and campaigned in support of healthy nutrition. The world is watching Mayor Bloomberg's new health revolution. Will his initiatives control the obesity and diabetes epidemic in New York? Only time will tell.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Chief Executive of New York City since 2002,

report

anti-smoking policies, and new educational campaigns for the prevention of obesity and diabetes. Once the world's most polluted urban centre, Mexico City now seems intent on transforming its public health environment to the highest possible standard. In our final segment, Pilar Garcia Crespo sheds some light on why Spain has been ranked as one of the healthiest countries in the world. Surprisingly or not, people residing in the birthplace of the heart-healthy Mediterranean

diet also require government interventions targeting nutrition, physical activity and obesity.

These thought leaders, health ministries and governments have all prioritised the escalating public health burden related to Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs). Although unique, all of these individual or regional voices believe in the power of policy to encourage and provide greater opportunities for the future of human health.

has taken on the forces of Big Tobacco and the food and beverage industry, and succeeded in making change and reform in ways no one could have imagined. In his quest to reclaim the vibrancy of the Big Apple and wipe out poverty, unproductivity, and disease, what has been most visible in his relentless campaign for public reform are enforceable restrictions of sugar, saturated fats and smoking all in the name of health.

In a city where 800 languages are spoken, more than 22% of adult New York City residents are obese.

Across the United States, obesity and diabetes exist as two of the most serious threats to the total population and

the privatized health care system. New York State has the fourth largest number of people living with diabetes, behind California, Florida and Texas respectively, and in a city where 800 languages are spoken, more than 22% of adult New York City residents are obese. Health disparities are traceable in part to fundamental social and environmental problems. According to Scott Stringer, Manhattan Borough President, 'the scarcity of fresh foods and produce prevalent in low-income neighbourhoods and communities of colour, contribute to the disproportionate disease burden carried by the city's minority populations'. In one study conducted from 2002 to 2004, New York City's rates of obesity and diagnosed diabetes both increased by 17% and researchers concluded that during that time the adult population had gained ten million pounds in weight.^{1,2}

The researchers also concluded that the over-consumption of sugary drinks was to blame. Sadly 45% of all newly diagnosed cases of type 2 diabetes for New York State occur in children.³ Age, black race, Hispanic ethnicity, elevated body mass index, and low educational attainment have all been cited as the most predominant features for diabetes risk in New York City.⁴ The economic burden is hard to ignore. According to the New York City Department of Health, obesity related healthcare problems, including diabetes, account for USD 4 billion a year. For every person diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, the estimated cost to the New York Health and Hospitals Corporation is USD 400,000.

New Health Revolution

In an effort to transform the impaired public health status of his city, Mayor



Bloomberg decided to take charge; determining average New York citizens don't know what's best for them. He has likened his municipal restrictions to outlawing drunk driving or protecting citizens from potential terrorists. The Mayor's most controversial initiatives include: the ban of trans fat in cooking oils for the city's 24,000 food establishments; an ordinance requiring chain restaurants in the city to display calorie information on menus and menu boards; and illegalizing smoking in the city's parks, beaches, marinas, boardwalks and pedestrian plazas. According to Dr. Susan Kansagra, an assistant commissioner at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, since Bloomberg took office, New York City's smoking rate has dropped from 22% to just above 14%.

Since Bloomberg took office, New York City's smoking rate has dropped from 22% to just above 14%.

To date, the most provoking initiative has been the Bloomberg 'Soda Ban',

which was set to take effect on 12 March 2013. Most of all stakeholders involved in helping New York's obesity problem, including public health officials, scientists, nutritionists and medical professionals, believe curtailing the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages is a significant step in the effort to reduce obesity and to promote citizens' general health and wellness. (Please see Marion Nestle's article, *Liberty from Big Soda*.) The Mayor's third and final term in office ends this year, and while his Soda Ban was invalidated the day it was to take effect, one thing is clear: in the effort to minimize the risks associated with the exposed and unstable health status of New York, the Mayor has provided unprecedented awareness to the 21st century health epidemic for Non-communicable Diseases — chiefly obesity and type 2 diabetes.

Liberty from Big Soda

Marion Nestle

While some people believe that Mayor Bloomberg's soda regulations go too far, Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition at New York University, believes that they may not go far enough.

Mayor Bloomberg's 16 ounce cap on sugary sodas that should have gone in effect on 12 March 2013, would have prohibited restaurants, movie theatres, sports venues and food carts from selling extra-large portions of sugar-packed drinks.

Stay calm. This does not signal the end of democracy in America.

If we want Americans to be healthy, we are going to have to take actions like this – and many more – and do so soon. It's long past time to tax sugar soda, crack down further on what gets sold in our schools, tackle abusive marketing practices, demand a redesign of labels – and extend the soda cap, no matter how controversial it may seem.



This must be the beginning, not the end, of efforts toward a healthier America.

In short, we need a series of serious changes to make the healthy choice the easy choice. The soda size cap is a nudge in that direction. You will still be able to drink all the soda, and down all the sugar, that you want. The cap on soda size makes it just a tiny bit harder for you to do so.

That 'tiny bit harder' is its point. If you have to order two sodas instead of one, maybe you won't. If you have to add sugar to your coffee drink yourself, maybe you will only add one or two teaspoons instead of the ten or more someone else put in there for you.

For a public health nutritionist like me, the soda size cap is a terrific idea. Unlike other foods, sodas are a unique target for intervention. They contain sugars – and sugar calories – but nothing else of nutritional value. They are candy in liquid form. Candy has a place in healthy diets, but a small one. So it should be for sodas.

It's no surprise that people who drink large amounts of liquid candy have worse diets, are heavier, and have more health problems than those who do not. And it looks like the body doesn't compute the calories from liquid sugars as accurately as it does for sugars in foods. On top of that, big sizes make the problems worse. To state the obvious, larger portions have more calories.

But big sizes also have other effects. They induce people to eat and drink more than they would if given smaller portions. Big sizes confuse people into underestimating the number of calories consumed.

Most people eat whatever size is in front of them – the 'default,' in public

health-speak – and are content with that amount. So a reasonable goal of public health intervention is to change the default drink to a smaller size. Hence: Bloomberg's 16 ounce size cap.

From my nutritionist's perspective, a 16 ounce soda is still generous. Just one contains the equivalent of 12 packets of sugar. Just one provides 10% of the daily calorie needs of someone who typically eats 2,000 calories a day. Just one contains the upper limit of sugar intake that health officials recommend for an entire day. Once you down a 16 ounce soda, it's best to stop right there.

City officials concerned about the health of their citizens, as those in New York most definitely are, want to do everything they can to prevent obesity and the illnesses that go with it. Their rationale is humanitarian, but also fiscal. Poor health is expensive for both individuals and society.

We can thank Big Soda – Coca-Cola, Pepsi and their trade association, the American Beverage Association – for the contribution of big sodas to weight gain. The soda industry may profess to care more about your well-being these days, but it ultimately will not do anything to promote health if doing so harms sales.

Here are some additional actions New York City should take, if only it were allowed to:

- Tax sodas. Raising the price of sodas would discourage sales, especially among young people most susceptible to marketing efforts and most vulnerable to weight gain.

- Remove vending machines from schools. Yes, the Beverage Association

only puts 'better-for-you' drinks in school vending machines, but sugar-filled sports drinks are still liquid candy. And kids should not have to pay for water in schools.

- Restrict marketing of sodas to children. Soda companies market extensively to children and adolescents, especially those in low-income neighborhoods. We already have restrictions on cigarette and alcohol marketing to kids. It breaks no new ground to add sodas to the list.

- Show full calories on the front of containers. The current way calories are tallied, in a measure called 'calories-per-serving,' is confusing because the servings are unrealistically small and people don't do the math.

Actions like these will evoke ferocious opposition from the soda industry, and it will spare no expense to make sure such things never happen. Polls say that many New Yorkers oppose the 16 ounce cap and would oppose measures like this, too.

But I can't tell whether the opposition comes from genuine concern about limits on personal choice or because soda companies have spent millions of dollars to protect their interests and gin up histrionic, misinformed opposition.

The 16 ounce soda is the new default size in New York City. While waiting for the court decision and for politics to play out, why not give it a chance? Maybe it will help you live a healthier and longer life.

Excerpt from the NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, 8 March 2013