

EHFG 2012: Strategies against the obesity epidemic



Every second adult in the EU is overweight; double the number of 20 years ago. Experts addressing the European Health Forum Gastein reported on new approaches to tackling obesity, which could reduce the burden of chronic disease and deliver substantial cost savings to struggling European healthcare systems.

Bad Hofgastein, 5 October 2012 – Tackling obesity could dramatically cut the burden on public budgets across Europe, experts claimed today at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG).

According to WHO figures, some 1 billion people worldwide are overweight, more than 300 million of them obese. Overweight and obesity account for 44% of the global burden of type 2 diabetes, 23% of ischemic heart disease, and seven to 41% of certain forms of cancer. More than half the adult population of the EU is either overweight or obese, and over the past 20 years obesity has doubled, according to a study by the OECD and the European Commission. Adult obesity and overweight are responsible for up to 6% of healthcare expenditure in the European region.

“There is a growing need for effective solutions that prevent and treat chronic disease. European health systems are under enormous pressure to deal with the epidemic of chronic disease, despite fewer resources, and greater demand and expectation”, Karen Miller-Kovach, Chief Scientist of Weight Watchers International, told the EHFG. “And, as the level of obesity continues to rise, it will go hand in hand with an increase in chronic disease and overwhelming financial demands on our health-care systems. However, prevention and effective treatment is possible.” Obesity treatment has been proven to be an effective approach for chronic disease prevention, with lifestyle interventions that deliver medically significant weight loss ($\geq 5\%$ of the initial weight) leading to multiple clinical benefits.

“Obesity must be recognised as an independent risk factor for chronic disease. If the EU wishes to reduce the risk of chronic diseases, to improve the health of its citizens, and to reduce the financial burden on Member States’ health systems, overweight and obesity solutions must be part of the strategy,” said Karen Miller-Kovach. “It is now time to look beyond current traditional medical and payment models to find evidence based solutions that are effective, scalable and realistic in today’s economy.”

“Public private partnerships” offer one of the solutions to tackle obesity

EU Member States fighting the obesity epidemic are deploying a variety of strategies. For instance, in the UK commissioners of public health prevention programmes and primary healthcare services have been investing in credible commercial weight loss programme providers. An independent audit of almost 30,000 patients who were referred to Weight Watchers demonstrated that the intervention delivered effective weight loss outcomes, with 58% completing the programme, losing an average of 5.5% of their initial weight. “This is an example of how the use of appropriate programmes can prove effective for a health system,” said Karen Miller-Kovach.

One reason the British have taken this route is that some commercial slimming programmes have been shown to be more effective and more cost effective than comparable services provided by public systems by a University of Birmingham study, published in the British



Medical Journal. This compared progress among 740 obese men and women following a variety of weight management programmes, led either by qualified healthcare professionals or credible commercial providers. An “exercise only control group” received 12-week vouchers to attend a local leisure centre. The most effective and cost effective approach, said Karen Miller-Kovach, was when healthcare professionals diagnosed obesity and then referred their patients on. In fact, the programmes provided by primary care showed no evidence of effectiveness. The only programme to achieve statistically greater weight loss than the comparator group was the private service Weight Watchers.

This result was supported by further evidence published in 2011 in The Lancet: A multicentre randomised clinical trial carried out in the UK, Germany and Australia indicated that adults referred to Weight Watchers by their doctor lost more than twice as much weight over 12 months compared with those who received standard care from primary health services.

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the European Union. In this its 15th year, the EHFG attracts more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries to discuss major topics on the future of the European health care system from 3 to 6 October 2012.

Please find photos of the European Health Forum Gastein using this link: <http://www.ehfg.org/940.html>.

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