
Newsday.com, Melville, NY

U.S. Welcomes U.N. Anti-Obesity Plan

January 22, 2004

Jonathan Fowler

<<<>>>

This document is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory website at
<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps1/CERU/Articles/CERU-0401-194-OWI.doc>

GENEVA -- The United States, accused of kowtowing to the food industry, on Thursday welcomed a U.N. plan urging diets lighter in sugar and fat as ways to reduce obesity and fight heart disease and diabetes, which kill millions each year.

The World Health Organization proposals to governments include pushing manufacturers to make deeper cuts in those ingredients and changes to advertising and tax policy to promote healthier eating.

Some campaigners have criticized the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush for allegedly yielding to the food industry and trying to dilute the WHO plan, which is part of a broader drive to encourage better lifestyles.

U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson, speaking to reporters after a meeting of the WHO executive, acknowledged these concerns: "I know there have been some questions as to the U.S. position."

He noted, however, that Washington backed an executive resolution which asks the 192-nation World Health Assembly -- which meets every May -- to give formal approval to the WHO's Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.

On Tuesday, the WHO executive accepted a U.S. proposal that would give governments a further month to comment on the plan -- something campaigners have claimed will allow more time for lobbying against it.

Thompson rejected this, saying the extra month was needed to ensure there was "more scientifically based evidence in the guidelines."

"I want to make sure that what we're putting out is the best science," he said.

U.S. officials have criticized a WHO study which was used to draft the obesity strategy, saying it did not adequately address an individual's responsibility to balance one's diet with one's physical activities. These officials also objected to singling out specific types of foods, such as those rich in fat and sugar.

Some 300 million people worldwide are obese and 750 million more are overweight, including 22 million children under age 5, according to the International Obesity Task Force. Once largely a problem of industrialized nations, obesity now is hitting developing countries too.

Noncommunicable diseases -- which include cardiovascular problems and diabetes, often linked to obesity -- kill 34 million people a year, or around 60 percent of annual deaths worldwide. Most deaths are in poor countries.

Unlike a landmark tobacco control accord brokered last year by WHO, the WHO health plan would not lead to a binding treaty obliging WHO members who accept it to respect its provisions.

Some of the suggestions -- particularly recommendations on sugar -- have nonetheless fallen foul of the food industry, which says they are misguided and based on flawed science.

However, the Grocery Manufacturers of America, the world's largest association of food and drink companies, with members including PepsiCo Inc. and Hershey Foods Corp., said it was committed to working with WHO to combat obesity.