Increase in healthy life years through sugar, fat and salt taxes

By DTI

MELBOURNE, Australia: Modelling the effect of different combinations of taxes on sugar, salt and fat and a subsidy on fruits and vegetables on the death and morbidity rates of Australians, a new study has found that imposing a tax on sugar could avert about 270,000 disability-adjusted life years. In addition, the research estimated that, when combined to maximise benefits, taxes and subsidies could reduce the country’s health care spending by AUD 4 billion.

In the Western world, non-communicable diseases, such as obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and dental caries, are mainly attributable to an unbalanced intake of fats, sugars and salt. In order to tackle the burden of those diseases, an increasing number of countries have already implemented or proposed taxes on unhealthy foods and drinks. However, the actual cost-effectiveness of levies and subsidies on certain nutritional items to reduce the burden of diet-induced diseases is uncertain and can only be estimated.

In the current study, researchers at the University of Melbourne simulated the effect of different combinations of taxes on unhealthy foods and a subsidy on fruits and vegetables based on the Australian population of 22 million in 2010. The model analysis set the sizes of the taxes and subsidy such that combined there would be less than a one per cent change in total food expenditure by the average household.

The results showed that a tax on sugar had the greatest impact among the taxes simulated. A sugar tax could avert 270,000 disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), the researchers calculated. DALYs are years of a healthy lifespan that are lost to disease. This equals a gain of 1.2 years of healthy life for every 100 Australians alive in 2010, which is a health outcome that few other public health interventions could deliver across the whole population, according to the researchers.

In comparison, a salt tax was estimated to save 130,000 DALYs, a saturated fat tax 97,000 DALYs and a sugar-sweetened beverage tax 12,000 DALYs. As for a fruit and vegetable subsidy, the study was unable to determine an isolated clear health benefit, although it too made for additional averted DALYs and reduced health sector spending, the researchers wrote.

The study adds to growing evidence of large health benefits and cost-effectiveness of using taxes and regulatory measures to influence the consumption of healthy foods. Based on the results of the models, the formulation of a tax and subsidy package should therefore be given more prominent and serious consideration in public health nutrition strategy, they concluded.

The study, titled “Taxes and subsidies for improving diet and population health in Australia: A cost-effectiveness modelling study”, was published online on 14 February in the PLOS Medicine journal.

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“A preventative health care system is also a cost-efficient health care system”

An interview with Prof. Jörg Eberhard, Australia

By Kristin Hübner, DTI

On the occasion of this year’s World Oral Health Day (WOHD) on 20 March, Prof. Jörg Eberhard from the University of Sydney will be pre-

senting the Australian WOHD lecture, titled “Putting The Mouth In-\nto Health—Time for a paradigm change in dentistry!”. Dental Tribune Australia had the opportunity to speak with Eberhard, who was appointed the university’s first Chair of Life-Span Oral Health in 2015, about the role of preventative care in research and clinical practice and the general need for a more holistic view on medical conditions and oral health.

Prof. Jörg Eberhard: Research over the last several decades has shown that oral disease is linked to general health and other diseasess, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus and rheumatoid arthritis. The available evidence demonstrating this association is based on epidemiological studies, clinical intervention trials and knowledge of sound biological mechanisms.

Irrespective of this body of knowledge, a holistic view on medical conditions that includes oral health has not been established in clinical medical practice. “Putting the mouth into health” stands for the strategic vision of overcoming this shortcoming and is aimed at improving the community’s health.

How does oral health affect general health?

Dental caries and periodontal disease are the most common conditions worldwide and responsible for a large part of today’s disease burden. Caries results in pain, tooth loss and enormous treatment expenses. Each of these conditions negatively affects school attendance during childhood, reduces the ability to ensure good nutrition and to participate in a healthy social life among older people, and increases the load on health care systems. Periodontal disease is not limited to the oral cavity, but releases inflammatory mediators and bacteria into the bloodstream over decades. This may initiate or propagate the development of atherosclerotic plaques, leading to stroke or heart attack, and detrimentally affect blood glucose levels in pre- or diabetic states.

Do you think there is enough awareness among the public about the relationship between oral health, overall well-being and quality of life?

There is very limited awareness of the link between oral and general disease among the public; however, many health care professionals too are not aware of the association between oral and general health, even though it may significantly affect the well-being of patients. Oral health literacy education of the community and health care professionals is a major challenge for the dental profession. Furthermore, teaching of the association between oral and general health to medi-