

## 'WE MUST LEARN FROM MEXICO'S SUGARY DRINKS TAX'



The UK needs to follow Mexico in introducing a tax on sugary drinks if it is to ensure the dental health of future generations.

That's according to Fiona Sandom, president of the British Association of Dental Therapists, who has welcomed a new report – published in the *British Medical Journal* this week – that illustrates how a 10% tax on sugar-sweetened drinks in Mexico has slashed sales of tooth-rotting beverages by 12%.

As a result, sales of untaxed – and healthier – drinks have increased by 4% – all this, one year after implementation. Researchers now suggest these findings have important implications for health policy makers.

Fiona Sandom commented: 'Mexico has set a precedent with its commitment to improving the health of its population and it is now imperative that the UK government looks at the findings of this significant research and considers the evidence before it.

'The research coincides with two other studies that highlight the potential health risks of consuming sugary foods and must surely add to the mounting pressure on MPs and health experts to seriously consider a similar sugar tax here.'

A report in *The Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology* shows that reducing free sugars content in sugar-sweetened drinks (including fruit juices) in the UK by 40% over five years – without replacing them with any non-nutritive sweeteners – could prevent around 300,000 cases of type 2 diabetes over two decades.

And, research from the University of Leeds' Department of Cardiovascular Sciences, shows that foods high in sugar could affect the heart's recovery following a heart attack.

Fiona added: 'Health promotion is an essential component of health policy, too. Education is key to improving the wellbeing of our population as well as cost saving for the NHS. As the New Year starts, it was heartening to see the launch of Public Health England's Change4Life Sugar Smart campaign – including the app that scans food and drink for sugar content.

'But, as dental professionals, we all need to put ourselves at the forefront of this drive to enlighten patients – especially in view of the fact that they come to see us when seemingly healthy. Given the links between systemic diseases and dental health, we must make every contact matter and seize the time spent in the chair to discuss diet and dental health habits. Only with an all-encompassing approach to health can preventive measures be successful.'

The average child in the UK consumes three times the annual amount recommended by the Specialist Advisory Committee on Nutrition.

Meanwhile, Mexico implemented its excise tax of 1 peso per litre on sugar-sweetened beverages in January 2014. With some of the highest levels of diabetes, overweight, and obesity in the world, reducing the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages was paramount in achieving an important target for obesity and diabetes prevention.

## NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS FOR OUR LEADERS

If Claire Stevens, BSPD's media spokesperson, could influence the New Year's resolutions of the UK's Health ministers, she knows exactly what she would like them to ask for. Her over-arching wish is for the next generation to be completely free from dental disease. In order



to achieve this, she believes the following New Year's resolutions should be made by the Health Ministers in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales:

1. Clear and consistent labeling of foods and drinks should be made mandatory to benefit consumers of all ages. New rules should make labeling completely simple – nothing half-baked or cloaked in jargon – so it's possible to understand immediately the amount of sugar in any given product. For instance, nine teaspoons in a standard can of Coke.
2. Introduction of a tax on food and drink with high sugar content but implemented in such a way that healthy food and drinks are incentivised. Currently, says Claire, her young patients tell her that a bottle of water in a vending machine is the same price as a bottle of sweetened, carbonated drink. Not only should the latter be more expensive but the water should be cheaper.
3. A clear plan of action is the third and last resolution that Claire would like our leaders to have. A report called *Sugar Reduction The evidence for Action* was published by Public Health England in October but BSPD has heard nothing since. She would like to be kept informed of developments and to see an implementation plan for the report's recommendations. Finally, says Claire, as more money is accrued by the UK's governments through higher taxation on sugar, it should fund programmes of prevention to reduce inequalities and meet the needs of local populations.