

# Sugar tax has earned its stripes but more must be done



The British Dental Association (BDA) has welcomed new research confirming the effectiveness of the sugar tax,<sup>1</sup> but warned the real benefits will be lost unless government shows its willingness to expand the levy and ring-fence proceeds to tackle child tooth decay and obesity.

The study by academics at the University of Oxford, University of Cambridge, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Exeter, Warwick and Bath Universities and published in *PLoS Medicine* finds clear evidence of manufacturers lowering sugar levels in drinks in response to the introduction of the levy.

The analysis shows when former Chancellor George Osborne announced plans to introduce the tax, around 52% of eligible soft drinks contained 5 g or more sugar per 100 ml and were liable for the tax. The levy came into force in April 2018, and by February 2019, only 15% of soft drinks were still liable.

A recent study found a 29% reduction in the total amount of sugar sold in soft drinks in the UK from 2015–2018,<sup>2</sup> as a direct result of industry reformulating products to avoid exposure to the tax.

While the Soft Drinks Industry Levy is now forecast to raise £340 million in 2020–21, dentists have expressed concerns that the last Spending Round announcement failed to make any commitment to ring-fence revenue for spending on preventive programmes in children.

The BDA has supported expansion of the levy, to include milk-based drinks and other products both to encourage reformulation,

and encourage behaviour change among consumers. While the original levy was meant to be targeted towards school sports, dentists have long advocated expansion into oral health programmes. Tooth decay remains the number one reason for hospital admissions among young children.

Effective long-term investment in early years oral health programmes in nurseries and primary schools in Scotland has shaved millions off treatment costs. While these policies have been adopted in nations from Chile to Israel, the vast majority of local authorities in England lack resources to embrace similar models, with 85% facing cuts to public health budgets.

BDA Chair Mick Armstrong said: 'The sugar tax has earned its stripes as a weapon in the arsenal of any government interested in tackling preventable disease among children.'

'The question now is, are ministers prepared to follow the evidence, double down and really reap the benefits?

'If we're going to win the war against obesity and tooth decay, revenues from an expanded levy must be ring-fenced, not left plugging holes in other budgets.'

## References

1. Scarborough P, Adhikari V, Harrington R *et al.* Impact of the announcement and implementation of the UK Soft Drinks Industry Levy on sugar content, price, product size and number of available soft drinks in the UK, 2015–19: a controlled interrupted time series analysis. *PLoS Med* 2020; **17**: e1003025.
2. NIHR Oxford Biomedical Research Centre. Amount of sugar sold in soft drinks drops by 29% in the UK. 13 January 2020. Available at: <https://oxfordbrc.nihr.ac.uk/amount-of-sugar-sold-in-soft-drinks-drops-by-29-in-the-uk/> (accessed 12 February 2020).

## BDA launches new UDA checker tool

The British Dental Association (BDA) has launched a new tool to enable general dental practitioners (GDPs) in England to check Unit of Dental Activity (UDA) values in their area.

The UDA Checker is based on analysis of publicly available data from the NHS Business Services Authority, and allows GDPs to compare a contract's UDA values to the average from their local area, NHS Area Team and the national average.

### The tool enables members to:

- Check important information about their contract and contracts in their area
- Easily compare contracts to other similar contracts in a postcode and NHS area
- Access key information when negotiating a personal UDA rate or dealing with NHS commissioners on issues around contract delivery, UDA values, and recruitment and retention.

The tool is available to all BDA members at <https://www.bda.org/udachecker>.

### Chair of the BDA's General Dental Practice Committee Dave Cottam said:

'We've set out to create a tool for all GDPs. For the Associate who needs to know the parameters when negotiating on UDA values. For the owner who needs to be better equipped in difficult conversations with commissioners.'

'The UDA is a broken system. But for as long as it remains common currency we believe all dentists should know the facts, and where they stand.'

'Sunlight is the best medicine. We're putting information tucked away on government websites into the hands of members, to help them seek real improvements in their working lives.'

