



Brussels, 10/02/10

Open Letter

To the attention of Mr Emil Boc, Prime Minister of Romania,
Mr Attila Czeke, Minister for Health

Dear Sirs,

I am writing to you in response to the announcement made on Tuesday 5 January 2010, concerning the proposed introduction of a 'junk-food tax'. The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) would like to take this opportunity to express its support for this move and congratulate the Romanian government for its willingness to take a bold step forward in the fight against overweight, obesity and diet-related diseases.

Romania, like many European countries, has been greatly affected by the burden of obesity; one in four people suffer from the condition and one in two people are overweight. In parallel, diabetes type II, hypertension and other cardiovascular diseases are also on the increase. Romania is not alone, and patterns in Europe have led to a situation whereby diet-related diseases now represent the cause of 60% of premature deaths. Looking beyond the impact on health, there is also an economic perspective that must be considered. As a result of disability and quality-adjusted life years lost, treatment and hospitalisation, diet-related diseases cost the EU economy in excess of €192 billion a year. The European public health community highlights the case for action and applauds the Romanian government for its move to address the challenge.

The main risk factors for overweight, obesity, and diet-related diseases are known and are largely modifiable. Poor diet and a lack of sufficient physical activity result in a situation whereby energy intake exceeds the amount being expended in our day to day lives. The increasing consumption of foods that are high in fats, salt and sugars (HFSS) reflects and contributes to the worsening of this trend. At a population level, food consumption is driven by price, availability and marketing. Retailers and producers provide easy access to cheap convenience foods while fruit and vegetables remain increasingly expensive. This, combined with sophisticated marketing techniques and a lack of transparent labelling, has led to a significant increase in the consumption of HFSS foods.

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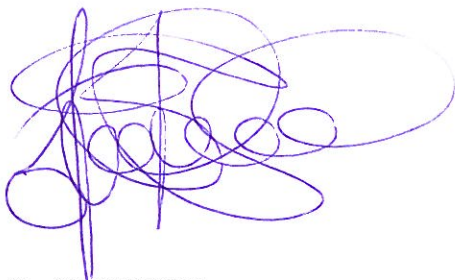
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In this context, your recent proposal to introduce a tax on “junk-food” is particularly welcomed by the European public health community and must be supported. Mechanisms to determine which foods are HFSS are well-established and have been implemented successfully in the UK with the statutory controls on food advertising. Furthermore, the proposed tax may lead to an increase in reformulation efforts, resulting in the wider availability of healthier options.

Pricing interventions have been proven to produce meaningful changes in patterns of food consumption and a reduction in diet-related diseases, particularly when a multi-nutrient approach is taken. The rationale for public policy initiatives aimed at the prevention of disease can therefore be justified in terms of reduced external costs. If combined with health promotion measures, designed to increase awareness of the health issues associated with poor diet, the impact may be significant. Furthermore, the commitment to reinvest the money accrued from this proposed tax would allow for further funds to be earmarked for prevention. EPHA would also recommend that the Romanian government considers using other pricing mechanisms or subsidies to make healthy options more widely available and affordable.

The European Public Health Alliance has consistently advocated action to reduce the level of obesity around Europe and the moves in Romania have been very well received among the European public health community. We hope that this initiative will lead others in Europe to take positive action to tackle this issue. Political action in the public interest, which understands commitments to health to be investments for the future, must be safeguarded from the interest of those economic operators that may seek to stall this process. EPHA wishes you the best of luck in gathering support for this initiative.

Yours sincerely,



Monika KOSINSKA

Secretary General

EPHA is the European Platform bringing together organisations from the public health community, representing health professionals, patient groups, health promotion and disease specific organisations and health NGOs. EPHA receives financial support from the European Commission, via the Public Health Programme of the European Union.

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