

# Affirmative action

Programmes aimed at changing eating habits and attitudes towards physical activity can help reduce childhood obesity rates, suggest **Sandrine Raffin** and **Jean-Michel Borys**

**O**n June 21 2006 a group of 170 leading nutrition scientists, policy makers, journalists and practitioners from Europe and the US met at a conference in Brussels to debate strategies to fight obesity. Called Managing Sweetness, the conference was organised under the aegis of the EU platform for action on diet, physical activity and health, and it concluded that there is no single cause of obesity and that effective programmes must address lifestyles more broadly. Speaking at the conference, Robert Madelin, director general of the European commission's health and consumer affairs department, challenged the conference to put this scientific consensus into action.

This is already happening in France. Childhood obesity is a major issue there, and while we essentially know what needs to be done to reduce obesity levels, putting this knowledge into practice is far harder.

The Epoque programme – Ensemble Prévenons l'Obésité des Enfants (together we can stop childhood obesity) – involves 500,000 people, including 50,000 children, in 10 French cities. Using local community stakeholders such as teachers, health professionals, parents, sports associations, media and others, the programme is designed to reinforce the health message by targeting the whole family. A number of events are run throughout the year, focusing on issues such as the health properties of ingredients such as vegetables or dairy products, or the benefits of certain sporting activities. Lessons on health and nutrition in school are also targeted at parents through posters in local shops and community centres.



This focus on sustainable, concrete action, at the local level, is the main reason for the success of the Epoque programme. Continuous communication of the health message, through the involvement of all local stakeholders, and the fact that the programme builds on existing projects have all helped achieve real results. The philosophy behind the programme is simple but efficient: a step-by-step approach towards a greater understanding of the importance of nutrition and physical activity, aimed at the whole family and without stigmatising any particular food or behaviour.

Participants are assessed according to their body mass index and the average prevalence of obesity in their community, as well as their willingness to participate in such schemes and to change their daily habits as a result.

Epoque is coordinated nationally by a team of consultants from Protéines, a health communication agency specialised in public health project management. Local implementation is enabled by city project managers, managing a local team, appointed by the mayor and in direct relation with the national coordination team. The programme involves private companies, academia, experts in public health and local and national politicians, and the cost – around €2 per year per person – is shared by both public and private institutions. Since its launch two years ago, over 1000 projects have taken place in the ten pilot cities, and the programme is now being rolled out to other cities, with a target of 100 by the end of 2007. It is also being expanded to other European countries, with pilots already underway in Spain and Belgium. ★

One quarter of European school-children are now overweight or obese, many more than previously predicted.

This figure is growing by 400,000 each year and is causing great concern.

Three million school-children in the EU are now classed as obese – a figure that is increasing annually by 85,000.

Research shows that these young people are likely to develop chronic diseases before or during early adulthood.

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