

NOTES FOR REMARKS

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To the Hamilton Board of Health

June 19, 2017

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Lucy Florio. I am here today in my capacity as Health Promotion Coordinator at Diabetes Canada. I work to promote health and prevent illness, and have worked with residents here in Hamilton for 18 years. I work at Diabetes Canada, an organization respected internationally for our focus on evidence-based guidelines and policy. I am a mother of 2 children and volunteer at their school, and a daughter of woman living with type 2 diabetes. Sometimes, when considering complicated health and social policy issues, those perspectives don't align and there is some conflict in fully considering the problem and the breadth of solutions. In this case, there is not conflict. When it comes to the changing health of our community and specifically our children we need to act on evidence based policy solutions – and we have the moral imperative to act now.

But it seems overwhelming – in terms of all the reasons we are at this point, as well as the potential solutions. The magnitude of the health challenge is great and it is increasing and Hamilton is sadly worse off than many other jurisdictions. Conditions such as obesity and diabetes have been rising rapidly – there are almost 57,000 new cases of diabetes and 7,006 new cases of heart disease in the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area each year.

In 2009-10, the percentage of Hamiltonians who were overweight or obese was 60%. The rate is higher for Hamilton men (69%) than for Hamilton women (51%), but both are higher than provincial averages for their sex.

And obesity often starts early in life and tracks into adulthood. In Canada we know that the rate of children who are overweight or obese is at 30%. That's one in three children.

One of the most sobering statements I have heard came from the former Surgeon General in the US, who said

*"Because of the increasing rates of obesity, unhealthy eating habits and physical inactivity, we may see the first generation that will be less healthy and have a shorter life expectancy than their parents."*

Over the past 30 years, obesity rates in children and youth have almost tripled. These higher rates of obesity coupled with less active lifestyles has now contributed to a diagnosis of type 2 diabetes in children– a disease previously associated with adults. Anecdotally, one of our pediatric endocrinologists said that in his practice today, "probably 10 per cent are children with type 2 diabetes." Our children deserve better.

These children with type 2 diabetes can also have high blood pressure or high cholesterol. They are on an unhealthy trajectory for their future. Overweight and obese kids are likely to become overweight and obese adults. They are at higher risk for complications like kidney failure in the future, heart disease, and stroke. They face a far bleaker outlook than adults living with the disease because they live with it for longer.

In 2014, 7.9% of Hamilton residents reported having diabetes. That's 36,958 people, or about a stadium full of spectators. This means the absenteeism rate, cost to employers for benefits and the hospitalization rate for diabetes are higher than the Ontario average and creates a burden on not only our health care system but on the Hamilton community as a whole. Diabetes and chronic disease are a burden on productivity and cost employers and we can try to change this.

What we eat, most importantly, impacts these trends. To put it simply, you can't outrun your fork and Canadians are eating too many foods that are high in fat, salt and sugar. We know that Canadians are among the highest consumers of sugar worldwide, with only 9 other OECD countries consuming more sugar per capita. And sugary drinks are the single greatest contributor of sugar in our diets – one serving can contain 40 grams, or 10 teaspoons of sugar. Youth, on average, drink over a half litre of sugary drinks each day which can contain up to 16 teaspoons or 64 grams of sugar.

Sugar sweetened drinks have little or no health benefits – just a long list of health risks. They are a significant driver of chronic weight gain, obesity, type 2 diabetes and many other chronic diseases.

These products are unique in that sugary drinks do not provide the same feeling of fullness as solid food for the same number of calories, so individuals do not compensate by eating less. People who regularly consume these drinks often gain weight as a result. One – two servings per day increase your risk of type 2 diabetes by approximately 25 per cent, even at a healthy weight. That is worth repeating. A person who regularly drinks sugary drinks is at a higher risk of diabetes even if they don't gain weight. A growing body of research shows that sugar sweetened drinks gets quickly absorbed into the bloodstream leading to a spike in blood sugar which the body is not well-equipped to handle repeatedly.

If we can reduce sugary drink consumption, we can significantly reduce overall sugar intake and reduce health risks.

In previous months, you heard from my colleagues who outlined the huge quantities of sugary drinks being consumed in Canada. Intake is well above recommended limits and is putting our communities at risk. So what can we do for a complex health and social problem? We don't find ourselves in this mess for one single reason. Thus, I can assure you that there isn't a one-step solution and indeed, we never said there was. A successful approach will require interventions at the individual level, meaning education and food skills – but more importantly at the community level, like the changes that are being considered by the city of Hamilton. We are also working very hard at the provincial and national levels of government to institute change. Diabetes Canada is proud to work with our partners to encourage all levels of government to create healthy food environments. We are advocating for better labeling on foods, restrictions on food and beverage marketing to children and a levy on sugary drinks with revenues from the levy to be used for healthy eating initiatives.

Hamilton is at a pivotal intersection. We applaud this Board of Health for acknowledging the issue of sugary drinks and tasking Hamilton Public Health with analysis. We strongly support the recommendations outlined by Heart&Stroke a year ago. Interventions to ensure that water and milk are the default choice for children's meals will make the healthy choice the easy choice. Banning free refills, will start to de-normalize the cheap and frequent over-consumption of sugar sweetened beverages. We've seen these interventions applied elsewhere and we hope Hamilton is next.

Together with provincial and national level legislation to support healthy food environments we can make a positive change. A good example with successful results exists in tobacco control. Smoking rates in Canada have been more than cut in half, thanks to a comprehensive strategy which included restrictions around how these products could be marketed and sold along with education and taxation. We need that same comprehensive strategy around nutrition and in particular sugar.

It will take a concerted effort – just like those for tobacco reduction. This will require elected officials at all levels of government to act boldly and we support you to do just that. Thank you for your strong leadership to date, and I hope you will seize this opportunity ahead to help make Hamilton a healthy place for our families and a true leader in public health.