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Taxation of sugar sweetened beverages in Canada a necessity

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The Heart and Stroke Foundation (HSF) is a trusted ally of Canadians in our battle against heart disease and stroke. Treatment of heart disease is costly and often not curative. For 30 per cent of those affected, sudden death due to a heart attack is the first indicator of a Heart problem.

Preventing heart disease is critical and the HSF has called upon Canadians to reduce their intake of added sugar and have asked our policy makers to tax sugar sweetened beverages. Canadians should embrace both recommendations.

Excess sugar intake is linked with heart disease as well as obesity, hypertension, stroke, type 2 diabetes and tooth decay. The HSF has joined the Ontario Medical Association, the Canadian Pediatric Society, the Institute of Medicine, the American Heart Association and the World Health Organization in calling for a worldwide reduction in added sugar consumption. The first step in reducing sugar intake is to reduce the consumption of sugary drinks.

Sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) are the single largest contributor of added sugar in our diets. Canadian consumption averages 110 litres per person per year. There is a strong scientific consensus that SSBs have no nutritional value and are significant promoters of excess weight gain and of the resultant chronic diseases.

Humans do not compensate for liquid calories by reducing solid food intake. Meals washed down by liquid sugar add undetected calories which promote dangerous weight gain. Even those with a healthy weight are not safe. Sugary drinks are linked with diabetes, heart disease and hypertension regardless of weight status.

The science is clear as to the dangerous effects of excess sugar consumption and of sugary drinks yet there is public debate as to whether targeted taxation of SSBs is a reasonable step. There is, however, good objective evidence to support taxation.

Sugary drinks are consumed in hazardous quantities by many Canadians, leading to costly chronic diseases that drive up health-care costs. Targeted taxation of sugary drinks promotes personal responsibility by allowing those that drink the most, and take the biggest risk, to contribute more towards health-care costs. France began taxing SSBs in 2012 and has collected hundreds of millions of dollars which have been allocated towards health care.

The tobacco experience has taught us that raising the price of a product reduces its consumption. Targeted taxation is a disincentive to purchase and serves as a point of purchase reminder that the product is unhealthy. The dramatic decline in smoking rates and accompanying drop in lung cancer rates has saved countless Canadian lives and preserved health-care dollars. It is the combination of education and taxation that is helping us win the battle against Big Tobacco.

Inspired by the tobacco experience. Mexico recently introduced a 10 per cent tax on SSBs. The preliminary results indicate a 10 per cent decline in the purchase of these products and a 13 per cent increase in water purchase.

As in France, millions of dollars have been collected to offset the illness burden associated with sugary drinks and there has not been any shift of purchasing to bordering countries.

Canadians realize that taxes are the price we pay to fund the services we cherish but we want to be taxed wisely and sparingly.

A tax that helps us to be healthier and helps contain health care costs is good tax policy. Even low-income Canadians are highly supportive of a tax on SSB especially if the proceeds from the tax are used to help them adopt otherwise unaffordable healthier lifestyles.

Tax proceeds could be used to help them purchase fruits and vegetables and to partake in physical activity opportunities.

Big Soda is aware that a tax on sugary drinks will reduce sales of these low cost products and they, and their proxy voices, are vociferous in opposition of the concept.

Canadians should be wary of those who deny the role of sugary drinks in illness and claim that taxation doesn't work. The facts speak otherwise.

Canadians should take heed of the Heart and Stroke Foundation's position on sugar. Policy makers need to carefully evaluate the overwhelming evidence as to the negative effects of sugary drinks and of the usefulness of both education and of selective taxation in improving the health of Canadians.

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