

What can we do to help tackle the obesity crisis?

Should consultants put pressure on caterers for the sake of the next generation asks Andrew Etherington, Director at Andrew Etherington Associates.

With rising obesity levels, how should the industry react and is it partly to blame?

It is a sad, but well-known fact that rates of obesity in the UK are continuing to rise. At a school meals conference last week we were told that 1 in 10 children starting infants school are overweight or obese, and this rises to a staggering 1 in 4 when they move to secondary schools some 6 years later. It was also noted that 70 per cent of the adults in the UK are predicted to be overweight or obese by 2034.

Yet it is rare these days to find a school meals catering contractor who does not proudly boast that “we are a fresh food company”. Something must be going wrong, somewhere. To be fair to these caterers, eating at school accounts for only 190 out of the 1,100 meals children consume each year. So they can’t really take the blame, and the government’s School Food Plan does mean that caterers are strictly limited to what they can serve.

So is it on the high street that the blame lies? We all know of well-known bakery chains that sell bags of doughnuts to children on the way to school, and stop at any motorway service station and you will see the longest queues at the likes of McDonalds and KFC. Supermarket shelves are overflowing with ready meals containing excessive amounts of fat and salt, let alone BOGOFs, supersized multi-packs and massive bottles of sugary fizzy drinks.

I was amazed this weekend to see a newly opened kiosk in my local shopping centre that will “blend” soft ice cream with any kind of chocolate bar you wish. As this was in



affluent Royal Tunbridge Wells, you might think that it’s to be expected that I should be “disgusted”, but we know that rates of obesity are directly linked to levels of deprivation. As I travel around the country with my work I see that in much poorer areas such as the

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Midlands and Northern England, it is the norm to see a multitude of takeaways selling cheap fast food. It seems that it is cheaper to live off that kind of diet rather than buying fresh food and cooking it at home.

Surely we must be on safer and healthier ground in our hospitals? As a patient on the wards you almost certainly are fed a balanced and healthy diet, but take a look at the heavily commercialised visitor areas and you will definitely find the complete opposite. How can it be, that when the NHS is burdened with a £16 billion annual bill for addressing the results of obesity such as treating diabetes and heart disease (more than the £13.6 billion the cost of the police and fire service combined), NHS managers are seeking to maximise their income from well-known high street franchisees who sell a vast range of profitable yet unhealthy sweets, sandwiches, snacks and fizzy drinks.

As consultants who presumably have a key role in influencing the eating habits of the customer, do we have a moral duty to espouse a healthy lifestyle and improve the well-being of our nation? Are we really thought leaders, or do we simply shrug and reflect what we see happening around us?



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Despite this seemingly disastrous prospect, I am pleased to say that we are now seeing some good signs that things are actually changing.

Schools are increasingly growing herbs, vegetables and fruit on site. Cookery lessons are being included on the curriculum and children are once again starting to understand the link between fresh ingredients and a healthy diet.

It was recently reported that younger people are drinking significantly less than older generations – especially the over 60s like me! New students arriving at University are being offered free courses in “Ten key dishes you can cook yourself from scratch” and college and university caterers report that the healthier options are becoming much more popular at their sites.

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Whilst the government is, for some reason, reluctant to impose seemingly common sense measures such as a sugar tax, limits on pack sizes and multi-buys or a ban on fast food advertising on the television, manufacturers are at last bowing to pressure. Products clearly showing reduced levels of

fat, salt and sugar are selling well, and the ever-popular meal deals now all include healthy options such as cut fruit and flavoured waters in place of a bag of crisps and unhealthy soft drinks.

As caterers we are all witnessing the massive increase in home deliveries. Hopefully this must mean that customers are eating the same freshly prepared dishes at home as they would eat in a restaurant. We are also seeing the acceptance of mis-shapen or knobbly fruit and vegetables, and all chefs should be buying these, rather than insisting on supermarket “quality” ingredients.

If manufacturers are altering the recipes of many of their products to reduce fat, sugar and salt content, for the sake of the next generation should we, as consultants, also put pressure on caterers to do the same?