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Opening Remarks to the OECD Obesity Panel

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Allow me to thank the OECD and the organizing committee for this opportunity to address such a distinguished audience on a topic of great concern to the World Heart Federation.

I would like to structure my remarks in three parts. First, why does the World Heart Federation care about the obesity epidemic? Second, what is causing this epidemic? And third, what must be done?

1. The World Heart Federation and why we care about obesity

The World Heart Federation is an NGO which brings together all societies of cardiology (medical community) and heart foundations (public health) around the globe. We have 180 member organizations in 100 countries, including members in each and every OECD member country. Our mission is to prevent and control heart disease and stroke. We have a tremendous challenge before us since cardiovascular disease causes one out of every three deaths and as such is the leading cause of death around the globe.

The number of obese adults has reached 300 million and overweight and obese together account for 1 billion people. About 10% of young people aged 5-17 years are overweight, corresponding for the year 2000 to 155 million overweight children including 30-45 million obese children world-wide.

Obesity is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease. According to the Framingham Heart Study, as of a BMI of 25, a 10% increase in weight corresponds approximately to a 30% increase in the incidence of heart disease. Obesity causes a 40 year old male or female to lose 6-8 years of life to speak nothing of lost productive life years.

Of even greater concern is the prevalence of metabolic syndrome among obese adolescents. Metabolic syndrome is a cluster of cardiovascular risk factors –

including hypertension, mildly elevated triglycerides, low HDL cholesterol and mildly elevated glucose levels (pre-diabetes). Metabolic syndrome was found in less than 0.1% of adolescents of normal weight, but in 28.7% of obese adolescents¹.

2. What are the causes of the obesity epidemic?

The causes are many and their intensity varies by country. Nonetheless, there is a general deterioration in eating patterns, accompanied by less and less physical activity. Fewer meals are prepared at home. Portions have increased over time. There is a greater tendency to snack between meals. When adolescents are asked to name their favorite vegetable in the UK they respond "French fries". The quality of school meals has declined. Too many people, and particularly children, are physically inactive. Between 60 and 85% of the world's adult population are estimated to be insufficiently active for their health. Two-thirds of children are not active enough. Decreasing physical activity in schools is an alarming trend. In Europe, only 3 countries offer at least 2 hours per week of physical activity. In the US, participation in high school physical education classes dropped from 42% in 1991 to 29% in 1999. Urban environments offer few opportunities for physical activity. The television and computer culture fosters a sedentary snacking lifestyle.

1 billion people around the globe are not in "energy balance", and do not realize that calories in and calories out matter.

3. What must be done?

We believe that the World Health Organization Global Strategy on Diet Physical Activity and Health is an excellent first step towards a sustained, long-term commitment on the part of international organizations, governments, industry, the medical community and NGO's to work together to curtail the obesity epidemic.

Governments must make healthy diets and physical activity a national priority. Funds must be put into health promotion. Schools must become health promoting schools with physical activity programs in and unhealthy food out.

Industry must improve and simplify content labeling on all foods including what is served in restaurants. They must reduce portion sizes, reduce salt and sugar levels in their products and encourage fat substitution (out of saturated fats and into PUFA's and MUFA's) while eliminating trans fats. Industry must market healthy lifestyles. Food retailers, the transport sector and many others must help make healthy choices easy choices.

NGO's like ourselves must actively engage with all stakeholders to encourage concrete actions. We are lending our resources and experience in communities and countries in order to fight obesity. We build awareness through our World Heart Day program, help encourage healthy eating with food labeling programs and encourage physical activity. Public/private partnerships are planned.

¹ 3rd NHANES 1988-1994 cohort

And the OECD could help foster change by measuring countries' health performances in terms of the percentage of health expenditure directed to health promotion, adult and childhood obesity rates over time, and even the percentage of health-promoting schools. What gets measured gets done.

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