Death by food: Why pharmacists should care

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DIETARY RISKS CONTRIBUTED TO THE LOSS OF MORE THAN 65,000 lives and to more than 1 million person-years of disability in Canada in 2010.¹ Lack of fruit, vegetables, nuts and seeds and high intake of dietary sodium, free sugars and saturated and trans fats are the major components of these risks.^{2,3}

Why is this important for pharmacists?

Pharmacists see the manifestations of chronic disease every day—in their patients with hypertension, heart failure, coronary artery disease, stroke and others. As frontline health care professionals who frequently interact with members of the public,⁴ pharmacists have the opportunity to play a vital role in advocating for a healthy eating environment and educating about healthy food choices. Many pharmacies are now selling food products, which can be either part of the problem or the start of the solution.

What is currently being done?

Current educational food strategies, which are supported by the government, food industry and health care professionals, have improved Canadians' awareness about dietary issues. Most Canadians are striving to eat healthfully and believe they are doing so, yet paradoxically it has been reported that individuals continue to engage in unhealthy eating behaviours even when the risks are well known.⁵

What needs to be done?

We need effective policies to improve the food environment, which in turn will make healthy behaviours easier for Canadians to adopt. Food policies also need a strong implementation plan. Such a plan might include restricting marketing of unhealthy foods to

children,⁶ using clear and easy-to-understand food labels (including restaurants) and making accessing healthy foods easier and more affordable while doing the opposite with unhealthy foods.^{2,6}

Healthy food procurement policies also play an essential role in creating a healthy food environment, as they facilitate the purchase, provision and sale of healthy foods and beverages in public and private sector settings, such as schools and hospitals, where there is a clear and direct societal responsibility for the health of students and patients. It has also been reported that when combined with wellness programs, healthy food procurement policies not only improve employees' well-being but also generate substantial cost savings.⁷

What can pharmacists do?

As the most accessible primary health care providers, pharmacists can start from their own pharmacy, where they can educate members of the public about healthy food choices, highlight the benefits of such choices and the adverse effects of unhealthy choices and make healthy food an easy and affordable choice. They can also advocate for making healthy foods available at their community's schools and hospitals. When possible, this advocacy can be extended to local and national levels. A few years ago we made the switch to ban tobacco products from pharmacies. Now how about only selling healthy foods?

The Canadian Pharmacists Association is a member of the Canadian Hypertension Advisory Committee that is developing and advocating for healthy food policies. The policies and supporting organizations can be found at www.hypertensiontalk.com.

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