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Healthy hospital food initiatives in the United States: time to ban sugar sweetened beverages to reduce childhood obesity

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Abstract

While childhood obesity is a global problem, the extent and severity of the problem in United States, has resulted in a number of new initiatives, including recent hospital initiatives to limit the sale of sweetened beverages and other high calorie drinks in hospital vending machines and cafeterias. These proposed policy changes are not unique to United States, but are more comprehensive in the number of proposed hospitals that they will impact. Meanwhile, however, it is advised, that these initiatives should focus on banning sugar sweetened beverages, including sodas, 100% fruit juice and sports drinks, from hospital cafeterias and vending machines instead of limiting their presence, so as to ensure the success of these programs in reducing the prevalence of childhood obesity. If US hospitals comprehensively remove sugar sweetened beverages from their cafeterias and vending machines, these programs could subsequently become a model for efforts to address childhood obesity in other areas of the world.

Conclusion—Hospitals should be a model for health care reform in their communities and removing sugar sweetened beverages is a necessary first step.

Keywords

Hospital policies; Nutrition; Obesity

INTRODUCTION

Recently, major hospital groups in the United States, including prominent children's hospitals, have announced initiatives to improve the nutritional offerings at hospital cafeterias, in vending machines and in patient meals. Specifically, the New York City's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene announced on September 25, 2012 a Healthy Hospital Food Initiative of over 30 New York City hospitals. As part of the New York City initiative, beverage vending machines in hospitals will decrease the availability and portion size of high calorie beverages such as soft drinks. Similarly, the Partnership for a Healthier America (PHA) announced on October 6, 2012 that over 150 hospitals, including Kaiser Permanente, Catholic Health Initiatives, Cleveland Clinic and Centura Health have committed to increasing purchases of water, unflavored milk, teas, coffee and 100% fruit

and vegetable juices to 80% of beverage spending, thus limiting the amount of soft drinks and other high calorie drinks sold in the cafeteria and vending machines by July 1, 2015.

Meanwhile, in other countries, there is also a problem of fast food franchises being present in hospitals and unhealthy meals being served. In Mexico, Starbucks coffee opened up cafes in the Grupo Angeles Hospitals Health Services in the end 2011 with a goal for putting a Starbucks in each of the 23 hospital Angeles. Bumrungrand International Hospital in Bangkok, Thailand advertises on its webpage that in the hospital complex visitors and guests can find McDonalds and Starbucks restaurants. The Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia similarly has a McDonald's on its premises. Some of these hospitals, however, have nutritional guidelines that limit what can be sold. For example, the retailers in Melbourne at the Royal Children's Hospital must comply with a food policy that labels healthy food as green and unhealthy food as red, and intermediate food as amber. Meanwhile, in 2006, the Princess Margaret Hospital in Perth banned sodas and deep fried foods from its cafeterias and vending machines. In 2008 in the United Kingdom (UK), the National Health System banned all sodas from vending machines in hospitals in Wales but McDonald's and other fast food franchises are still at hospitals in other areas of the UK including a McDonald's at Guy's Hospital in London. Nutritional hospital policy initiatives are not limited to North America, Europe, Australia: in 2010, the government in Saudi Arabia announced a total ban on the sale of soft drinks in hospitals and clinics.

There have been the most research studies and data on the presence of sodas and low quality food items in North America, however, in part because of the extensive problem and severity of the obesity epidemic. In a study of food and beverages available at US and Canadian Children's Hospitals, regular soft drinks were sold at 99% of the hospital cafeterias and in 75% of the non-cafeteria food outlets (1). A survey of 16 of the US's top hospitals listed as 'Honor Roll' hospitals in the 2001 US News and World Report found that 1/3rd of them had fast food franchises on their grounds (2). Soft drinks and other sweetened beverages need to be first on the agenda in any hospital nutrition improvement program given the connections between soft drink consumption and obesity in children and adolescents (3,4).

Ideally, hospitals, including children's hospitals, should follow in the footsteps of US public schools, which have been successful in limiting the amount of unhealthy foods on their campuses, with a specific focus on beverages. Public schools in California have banned the sale of sodas and other sweetened beverages in elementary (SB 677, Ortiz 2003) schools since 2003 and high schools since 2005 (SB 965, Escutla, 2005).

A couple of the children's hospital signees of the PHA Hospital Initiative have created a plan to remove or already removed all sugar-sweetened beverages from their hospitals. Specifically, Lucille Packard Children's Hospital in Stanford, California removed all sugar-sweetened beverages from their cafeterias and vending machines as well as 100% fruit juices with low fiber in February 2012. Similarly, Mercy Children's Hospital in Kansas City eliminated the sale of sugar-sweetened beverages from its cafeterias and vending machines in November 2012. Although the current PHA initiative does not call for the *ban* of sugar sweetened beverages or any limits on the sale of 100% fruit juices, given the extent of the

obesity epidemic in the United States, other signees should follow the lead of Lucille Packard and Mercy Children's Hospital.

One of the largest signees of the Partnership for a Healthier America Hospital Initiative, Kaiser Permanente with 37 hospitals, prides itself on having a commitment to healthy living and prevention. In addition to being a signee for this recent initiative, Kaiser Permanente has a 'Healthy Picks' Nutrition Program that it started in 2006; this program includes guidelines for vending machines to label healthy snacks and beverages as 'Healthy Picks' and to stock 50% of the vending machines with these items. Meanwhile, however, 'Healthy Picks' includes some high calorie beverages including juice drinks, sports-drinks, and all types of 100% fruit or vegetable juice. While the 'Healthy Picks' labels are present in the vending machines and cafeteria in San Francisco and South San Francisco, they are not large enough to be easily seen by the consumer (Fig. 1). Furthermore, the vending machines and cafeterias continue to be stocked with 16 oz bottles of soft drinks in addition to providing the consumer with 'Healthy Picks' beverage options, limiting the effectiveness of the program (Fig. 1).

Those hospital systems that have signed onto the PHA initiative including Kaiser Permanente as well as those participating in the New York City Hospital Initiative should *ban* the sale of sugar sweetened beverages on their premises to guarantee that these new initiative will have a measurable public health impact in United States. Waiting until July 2015, and to continuing to permit 20% of purchases to be soft drinks and other high calorie beverages does not necessarily guarantee a reduction in consumption of these beverages by outpatients and other visitors. Other areas of the world with similar obesity epidemics, are watching and reporting on these developments in the United States and ideally would follow suit.

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Small
"Healthy
Picks"
Labels in
Vending
Machine at
San
Francisco
Kaiser
Permanente.

Full calorie
sodas in
"Healthy
Picks"
vending
machine.

Figure 1.
'Healthy Picks' vending initiative at Kaiser Permanente Hospital, San Francisco.