National nutrition council is needed to tackle childhood obesity

Susan Mayor *London*

A national obesity institute should be set up to coordinate measures by different agencies to reduce the growing epidemic of obesity in children, the BMA has recommended in an action plan published this week.

The report says that a key step in reducing obesity in children is to establish a national obesity institute or nutrition council to improve collaboration among the different stakeholder groups to reduce the problem effectively. It also calls on the government to mount a "sustained and consistent" public education campaign to improve parents' and children's understanding of the benefits of healthy living.

The report was developed by the BMA's Board of Science after the association's annual representative meeting in 2004 decided that nutrition and exercise in childhood should be reviewed in the light of the major increases in childhood obesity over the past few years. Figures for 2002 showed that in the United Kingdom 22% of boys and 28% of girls aged between 2 and 15 years were overweight or obese.

Vivienne Nathanson, the BMA's head of science and

ethics, said: "If we can reduce childhood obesity, we have a good chance of reducing adult obesity as well, because eating and exercise habits from early life tend to continue." She said that the growing recognition of the long term health implications of obesity means that healthcare professionals should be involved in addressing the problem, together with other agencies.

The report says that existing primary care health professionals may not be well placed to meet the needs of obese children. It recommends that obesity management should be included in health service planning, with improved provision of staff time and motivational skills. Funding should be allocated to establish and sustain training programmes for professionals involved in the care of obese children, including specialist school nurses, health visitors, and GPs. This funding should be complemented by resources to allow children from any region in the United Kingdom to gain access to specialist regional obesity services.

Clearer guidance and advice should be developed on the most effective ways of losing

weight and maintaining weight loss, the report advises. It also calls for UK-wide surveillance of factors that lead to childhood obesity, developed by the public health observatories.

The report also recommends measures for schools, including provision of food that conforms to nutritional guidelines and using the curriculum to reinforce messages about healthy eating. It says that nutrient and compositional standards for school meals should be mandatory. Maximum or minimum levels for fat, sugar, salt, vitamins, and minerals should be set. To ensure compliance, the profile of health in regular inspections of schools by the

Office for Standards in Education should be raised.

It further recommends greater government funding of sport and recreation facilities in schools and communities and a ban on the advertising of unhealthy foodstuffs, including inappropriate sponsorship programmes, targeted at school children. The report says that the Food Standards Agency should develop new standards in nutritional content, food labelling, and food marketing and promotion for adoption by the food industry. □

Preventing Childhood Obesity can be seen at www.bma.org

Parents and children should have a better understanding of the benefits of healthy living, says the BMA

US survey shows extent of research misconduct

Owen Dyer *London*

A third of US scientists have engaged in serious research misconduct in the past three years, according to a survey published in the journal *Nature* (2005;435:718-9).

The findings are based on a postal survey answered by more than 3200 scientists around the United States, all of whom did work funded by the National Institutes of Health. They were asked if they had committed any of a list of 33 transgressions of research standards.

Ten of these transgressions

were identified as serious by a panel of members of research ethics boards. These included questionable relationships with research participants, failing to disclose commercial links, overlooking colleagues' use of flawed data, using other people's ideas without giving credit, and ignoring major aspects of requirements concerning the involvement of human participants.

A third of the scientists said they had breached at least one of these ethical rules in the previous three years. Less than 1% acknowledged outright falsification of data, but 6% said they had ignored or erased data that would have contradicted the results of their previous research. More than 12% said they had tolerated misuse of data by colleagues.

Failure to disclose commercial ties was rare—admitted by

just 0.3% of the respondents. But more than 15% said they had changed the design or results of a study under pressure from a funding source.

The study's lead author, Brian Martinson of the HealthPartners Research Foundation in Minneapolis, stressed that the findings did not indicate that a third of science research was flawed by questionable practices.

"But I think we've shown that it's about more than just fraud, and we shouldn't be looking for a few 'bad apples.' It may be that competition in science in this country has reached dysfunctional levels."

Dr Martinson said that additional data, yet to be published, indicated a strong link between scientists' perceptions of injustice in the allocation of funding and their propensity to engage in questionable research practices.

He said, "This is a problem that could get worse. Each scientist is encouraged to build up a research lab with postdoctoral fellows when they get their main NIH [National Institutes of Health] grant. It has been likened to a pyramid scheme, with the youngest scientists effectively being used as cheap labour. These young scientists may find that the grants are no longer there, because the available funds haven't grown at all in recent years."

The survey is the first of its kind to focus mainly on medical researchers. The US government's Office of Research Integrity proposed a similar survey in 2002, but the proposal was blocked by several scientific organisations, including the Association of American Medical Colleges. The association said it had not yet had a chance to study the latest findings. □