

# Silver bullet solutions are not the answer to tackling obesity

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Many attempts to curb the growing obesity pandemic are ineffective, costly and doomed to fail to reach their potential, according to recent research from the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University.

The study, conducted by Professor Jeroen Struben, his colleague Professor Laurette Dubé and PhD student Derek Chan found that single-pronged initiatives; including traffic light food labelling systems, wide-scale diet and exercise plans championed by health experts, or changes to food taxes commonly do not succeed – no matter how well they are designed – when they do not fully address the underlying complexities of the social obesity problem.

Professor Struben says,

“Our behaviours regarding food consumption are affected by our own habits, what our peers do, what firms offer us, and by the environment around us. The environment, in turn, is affected by our collective behaviours. Changes to our eating patterns are constrained by such vicious cycles, for example: food suppliers will not offer healthier alternatives if people are not in the habit of eating them, and people can’t choose them if they’re not available. These chicken-and-egg problems are part of a much bigger puzzle affecting how we eat and live, and unless each part is addressed our interventions won’t be effective.”

Rather than focusing on separate “silver-bullet” solutions, the study states that governments, producers, local community actors, and health experts should combine their efforts to stand a better chance of creating real changes in social and consumer behaviour.

Struben, Dubé, and Chan developed a “Nutritional Market Transformation Model” which captures how the actions of consumers, businesses and governments collectively shape society’s approach to, and relationship with food. By focusing on multiple basic factors that influence the foods we eat – the price, taste, nutrition and availability – and social factors such as education, media, social exposure and marketing, they’ve been able to explain why we eat the way we do, and why this is so hard to change. From this, they have also been able to suggest ways in which we can overcome these hurdles.

By aligning government, business and community efforts across all sectors, together they can transform food value chains and markets, alter consumer demands and behaviour, and as a result address the obesity problem.

Professor Struben says,

“It’s critical to address multiple factors at once, with several actors working towards a common goal through individual as well as collective action, and with a long-term commitment to the cause. For example, to achieve increased consumption of foods such as pulses, fruits and vegetables, development in agri-food innovation is important. However, this has to be accompanied at a community-level with: education for households on healthy eating, local retailers actually offering those products, farmers

market initiatives, changes to school lunches, larger retailers and producers committing to partly substitute the present marketing of unhealthy offerings for affordable, appealing healthy products, and low-income consumers receiving economic stimulus to purchase those foods.”

Furthermore, collective commitment to such projects would actually provide returns on investment for participating firms, and help towards achieving governmental economic and sustainability goals.

“Healthier societies mean reduced healthcare costs, sustainable prosperity, longer life, more people being able to work and a general better standard of living,” he says.

The research is part of a special feature of the Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, featuring research into the convergence of agriculture, health and wealth to ultimately support sustainable food security, nutrition, health and wealth for all. This initiative is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and is led and co-edited by the McGill Centre for the Convergence of Health and Economics (MCCHE).

For more information, or to request an interview with either Professor Jeroen Struben or Professor Laurette Dubé, please contact Kerry Gill at BlueSky PR on +44(0)1582 790 701, or via [kerry@bluesky-pr.com](mailto:kerry@bluesky-pr.com)