Letter from North America

PARADOX OF PLENTY: NUTRITION IN NEW YORK AND NEW DELHI

Continuing his public health goal in reducing consumption of ‘plenty of calories’, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently proposed to ban large soft-drinks with high sugar content, igniting passionate discussion regarding the State’s control over personal choice. The proposed soft-drink ban, the first in the nation, would prohibit the sale of any cup or bottle of sweetened drink larger than 16 fluid ounces (nearly 0.5 L), though consumers would not be prohibited from getting refills on smaller drink sizes. The law would apply to a wide range of drinks such as sodas, energy drinks and iced teas, but not to diet sodas, fruit juices or dairy drinks or to beverages sold in groceries. In a recent news conference to advocate his approach, Mayor Bloomberg demonstrated several large cups of soft drinks with equivalent amounts of sugar in them displayed as sugar cubes. The proposed law would take effect in March 2013, after public hearings.

Mayor Bloomberg is not alone in the fight against bad nutritional habits. First lady Michelle Obama has been a champion of healthy nutritional choices to reduce obesity and its associated health issues, one of the main causes of healthcare problems in the USA. The risks and costs of obesity (body mass index [BMI] >30 kg/m²) in the USA has been an ongoing discussion among physicians and public health policy experts. Yet, despite this increased awareness, obesity is still on the rise. While in 2000, no state had obesity prevalence above 30%, by 2010 the number of states with an obesity prevalence of 30% or more had increased to 12. Currently, no state has met the nation’s ‘Healthy People 2010’ goal to lower obesity prevalence to 15%. And with obesity directly linked to total calorie consumption, the USA has the highest amount of calories available per person (>4000 calories per day) in the world. The primary sources of the extra carbohydrates blamed for increased calorie consumption are sweetened beverages and potato chips, which now account for almost 25% of daily food energy in young adults in the USA.

Critics argue that nutritional choices are personal and the State should not impose restrictions on individual choice. In addition to criticizing that Mayor Bloomberg is turning New York state into a ‘Nanny State’ (‘nanny’ referring to someone taking care of children telling them what to do and what not to do), newspaper columns even commented on Bloomberg’s own food habits, quoting—‘His food issues have become New York City’s’—that he dumps salt on almost everything, even saltine crackers. He devours burnt bacon and peanut butter sandwiches. He has a weakness for hot dogs, cheeseburgers and fried chicken, washing them down with a glass of wine. Coca-Cola, the world’s largest soft-drink maker, is also pushing back against New York Mayor’s provocative proposal, quoting that when obesity was rising from 1999 to 2010, sugar intake from beverages was decreasing. During that period, Coca-Colasays, sugars from soda consumption fell 3% even as the percentage of obese children jumped 13% and obese adults climbed 7%.

New York state officials dispute these figures. Even some of the strong supporters of personal choice and freedom argue that ‘your right to harm yourself stops when I have to pay for it’. The medical costs paid by third-party payers for people who are obese were calculated to be US$ 1429 higher than those of normal weight. Medical costs associated with obesity were estimated at US$ 147 billion, supporting the argument for controlling fast foods and soft drinks. In the past, Mayor Bloomberg banned the use of trans-fats, and forced chain restaurants such as McDonald to declare calorie counts for each food item such as Big Mac (McDonald’s famous sandwich). ‘I like a Big Mac like everybody else,’ Mayor confessed, ‘I just want to know how many calories are in it.’

While officials in New York are preparing to battle against large corporations in promoting the ban on large soft-drinks, government officials in New Delhi are writing laws on a very different nutritional front—how to distribute among India’s poorest the plenty of food grains that are now available in India. Spurred by an economic boost, agricultural innovation and generous farm subsidies, India now grows so much grain that it has a bigger grain stockpile than any country except China, even after exporting to other countries such as Australia and countries in the Middle East. Yet, one-fifth of India’s people are malnourished—double the rate of other developing countries such as Vietnam and China. Only 41.4% of grain picked up by states from Central warehouses reach Indian homes, according to a recent World Bank study. With India facing both soaring inflation and a looming economic cool down, food prices rising faster than incomes for many middle-class working men and women have become a hot political issue. At the same time, tons of food is wasted due to problems of pervasive corruption, mismanagement and waste in programmes that are supposed to distribute food to the poor. To counter this maldistribution, states such as Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh have utilized advances in technology to better track food and ration cards; other states, such as Bihar, have experimented with food stamps as in the USA. Officials in New Delhi predict the laws directing better food distribution are likely to be discussed in Parliament in coming months.

Though encountering very different problems, the USA and India are proving to be interesting examples of governments making themselves active players in the nutritional habits and lives of their citizens. While citizens in New Delhi argue that the government is big and powerful, and that it should be able to store the crop, distribute efficiently and avoid malnutrition; citizens in New York protest about the government involvement in nutritional choices and criticize the excessive involvement of ‘Nanny State’.

LUI S. RODRIGUEZ
PRASAD S. ADUSUMILLI
Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center
New York