

**MINISTRY OF HEALTH**  
**Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago**

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC  
ADMINISTRATION**

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**Twelfth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public  
Administration on an Examination of the current level of childhood obesity  
and the State's interventions to promote a healthy lifestyle among children**

**January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020**

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### **Twelfth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an Examination of the current level of childhood obesity and the State's interventions to promote a healthy lifestyle among children**

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The objectives of this inquiry are as follows:

1. To examine the trends in obesity and associated illnesses amongst the student/child population;
2. To assess the services and facilities available to counteract and or alleviate childhood obesity;  
and
3. To examine the effectiveness of the School Nutrition Programme in the reduction of childhood obesity.

## **Recommendations**

- 1. To examine the trends in obesity and associated illnesses amongst the student/child population;**
- A. That the MoH seek to extract and compile information from the database of 6,118 children diagnosed with obesity in public health facilities and schools in order to:**
  - I. Disaggregate the statistics by gender, ethnicity and education district/Regional Health Authority (RHA); and**
  - II. Identify the obesity-related illnesses among this group.**

### **Response:**

It should be noted there is currently no database for the 6,118 children diagnosed with obesity. The data was submitted by the Regional Health Authorities, where the children were seen in their respective communities, and the data is located in medical records in various public health facilities. To retrieve and compile the information from the medical records would not be practical as the current system is paper-based, not archived in one location and the data would not be easily disaggregated. This project/task would involve numerous persons manually identifying, collating and recording the data from individual patient records.

The Ministry of Health is currently developing a Public Health Surveillance System with the profiling of the demographic component including; sex, ethnicity, geographical district and other medical information into medical records. The surveillance system should be designed and implemented by the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of the 2020 fiscal year.

**B. That the MoH seek to engage non-government/ private primary and secondary schools to develop a strategy for collecting data on the levels of obesity/overweight, and associated illnesses, among private school students.**

**Response:**

Currently, the MoH conducts school health services in both public and private primary schools based on its limited resources and capacity. The aim is to extend its services to all private primary and secondary schools.

In addition, the Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) conducts the Global School Health Survey (GSHS) and the Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS) every four (4) years with the last version being in 2017. The GSHS collects data on the levels of obesity/overweight, and associated illnesses from both public (government and non-government) and private schools. The methodology used for the sample selection is conducted by PAHO and it is expected that the next version of these surveys will be conducted in academic year 2021/2022.

**C. That the MoH continue to facilitate national-level research studies on childhood obesity through the GSHS and other intra-regional and international collaborations. Particular emphasis should be placed on longitudinal studies for the purposes of tracking trends in obesity, as outlined in recommendation A above. The Ministry's agenda for future cross-sectional or longitudinal research should incorporate an investigation of obesity/overweight disparities by geographic location, ethnicity, age and socioeconomic status.**

**Response:**

The MoH is in discussion with the University of the West Indies (UWI), in particular the Centre of Health Research, to incorporate the longitudinal study utilizing the cross-sectional Non-Communicable Disease Risk Factors Survey.

The MoH will continue to partner with key international agencies such as PAHO, Centre of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to conduct the 2021 GSHS & GYTS and facilitate the planning and conducting longitudinal studies for the

purposes of tracking trends in obesity disparities by geographic location, ethnicity, age and socioeconomic status.

**D. That as part of the MoH’s research activities, adequate attention is given to children living in Tobago, given that its rate of overweight/obesity appears to be higher than that of Trinidad.**

**Response:**

In the 2017 GSHS, all of the secondary schools were selected in Tobago to determine the rate of overweight/obesity for policy action. Further, there are established activities through the Nutrition & Dietetics Department of the Scarborough General Hospital, and also with the Community Dietitians for programmes that target schools and children that are overweight.

**E. That the MoH in its Ministerial Response, provide the Parliament with an update on the status of the execution of the proposed study to track obesity, NCDs and children’s consumption patterns (as outlined in paragraph 3.1.8 of this Report).**

**Response:**

The MoH is currently finalising the Terms of Reference to engage a consultant who would design, engage and develop the Project Plan for the National Food Consumption Survey and the National Food and Nutrition Policy. This activity is to commence in the last quarter of 2020. In the interim, the Non-Communicable Disease Risk Factors Survey planned for the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 2020 will collect data on obesity and consumption patterns.

## **Recommendations**

### **2. To assess the services and facilities available to counteract and or alleviate childhood obesity;**

#### **A. Given the importance of environmental (e.g. access to healthy foods, marketing) and family factors (SES, consumption patterns) in childhood obesity, the MoH should give particular attention to the following macro-level interventions:**

##### **I. The planned policy initiative to treat with regulating snacks sold in schools:**

###### **Response**

The MoH has developed a draft Nutritional Standards for schools for review and alignment to the guidelines in the PAHO Nutrient profile. Further, the regulation of snacks will incorporate these updated standards and the proposed activities and timelines as follows:

- Research and concept paper on the regulation of snacks by April 2020;
- Stakeholder consultations commence by June 2020; and
- Position paper and plan of action by September 2020.

##### **II. Creating incentives for local food manufacturers to create products with reduced sugar, fats and additives:**

###### **Response**

Through the Food Advisory Committee, the Ministry of Health will continue to work with the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MoE) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (MALF) to develop incentives for local food manufacturers to create products with reduced sugar, fats and additives.

For instance, under the Food Labelling Sub-Committee of the Food Advisory Committee, MoH recommendations are being made to amend the current local food laws and these include;

- special stipulations for certain nutrients of concern to be declared as mandatory on all food packages (whether local or imported); and

- Nutrients/items of concern for energy (calories), protein, carbohydrates, sodium, total fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, dietary fibre, trans-fats, potassium, total sugars and added sugars.

### **III. The consideration of a “sugar tax” on sugar-sweetened beverages;**

#### **Response**

The proposal for the implementation of a sugar taxation system is a project facilitated by the Ministry of Finance in collaboration with the UWI Health Economics Unit and the World Bank. The Ministry of Health has reviewed the recommendations and submitted its comments to the Ministry of Finance in August 2018 for their consideration.

### **B. That the MoH continue to provide sustained monitoring over the implementation of the Policy on the Sale of Sugar Sweetened Beverages in Schools to avoid losing progress made in combatting schools’ obesogenic environments:**

#### **Response**

The Ministry of Education, through the School Supervisory Division (SSD), submits quarterly compliance reports to the Ministry of Health. Since its implementation of the “Ban on sale of SSBs (sugar sweetened beverages)” in April 2017, monitoring reports inclusive of the compliance rate on the sale of Soft Drinks in Primary and Secondary Schools have achieved, tracked and actioned where there was non-compliance. As of December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019, there has been a compliance rate of 99% for primary schools and 97% for secondary schools, these were self-reported reports.

The Ministry of Health has begun discussions to increase monitoring of schools through collaboration with the Centre for Health Economics (HEU) in the University of the West Indies. The objective is to provide unbiased monitoring, verification and reporting of all schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Further, the MoH is considering the feasibility of using health personnel to assist in this initiative at various schools to ensure compliance with the ban and maintenance of standards.

**C. That the MoH evaluate whether the Childhood Assessment Clinics require increased allocations in order to be adequately equipped with the resources, equipment and staff to treat with ill and obese children;**

**Response**

The MoH will take the necessary steps to develop an evaluation instrument with the view that the Regional Health Authority will review and implementation will be undertaken by the General Manager, Primary Care. A comprehensive assessment of the aim and functions has to be determined with the current needs to ensure alignment of resources to the delivery of services. Thereafter, the respective financial and staffing allocation will be determined.

**D. That the MoE, MoH and MALF continue their collaboration on strategies to combat childhood obesity, as aligned with the National Strategic Plan for Prevention and Control of NCDs (2017-2021) and the CARPHA Plan of Action for Health Weights. In their responses to the Committee, the Ministries should provide an update on the collaborative initiatives in their work-plans for the latter half of 2019 and first quarter of 2020:**

**Response**

- i. The MoH, MoE and MALF have collaborated on fifty-four (54) Healthy Me School Caravans, targeting primary school aged students, and six (6) Healthy Me Camps, focusing on students between the ages of 6 to 15 years old, for the years 2018 and 2019. All stakeholders have worked together on formulating the National Health Promoting School Policy in 2019;
- ii. The Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs (MSYA), in collaboration with the MoH is in the process of procuring physical activity equipment to be provided to six (6) Youth Facilities for the Community-Based Healthy Youth Wellness TT Initiative. An additional seven (7) centers will receive equipment in 2020. These initiatives will contribute to increasing physical activity and reducing overweight and obesity among the youth population;
- iii. Additionally, physical activity equipment will be provided to all Government and Government Assisted Primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Procurement is underway for primary



schools and the standard bidding documents are to be published for Tender in Q1 Fiscal year 2020;

- iv. In April 2019, the MALF and the MoH hosted a “Run for Food Campaign” and in October 2019 PAHO/FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) World Food Day Observance with the goal to promote the consumption of fresh local fruits and vegetables and sustainable eating practices; and
- v. MOH’s NCD plan has incorporated the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) Plan of Action.

**E. That the MoE, in collaboration with the NPTA, NSDSL and MoH, increase its efforts to facilitate parental education sessions on healthy lifestyles and obesity prevention/treatment. The MoE can consider mandating principals to organize a minimum number of sessions for parents per academic term**

**Response:**

The Ministry of Health, through the Health Education Division, has continued its education to parents through the National Parent Teacher Association (NPTA) and the National School Dietary Services Limited (NSDSL). There have been sensitization sessions of Teachers, Principals and parents on NCDs in children in all seven (7) educational districts in Trinidad. The NPTA have also been a part of a Lay Facilitator Training on NCDs facilitated by the Health Education Division and Nutrition and Metabolism Division.

Even though the MoH has had those sensitization efforts, key challenges include; lack of parental involvement in PTA groups; and no existing PTAs in some schools.

**F. That the MoE, MoH and NSDSL seek to develop a standard, well-defined evaluation system for health and wellness campaigns, so that the following information is systematically recorded:**

- I. The estimated number of participants at each event; and
- II. Feedback from participant's post-intervention (which can be collected through short surveys) on the perceived usefulness of the event and suggestions for enhancing future initiatives.

**Response:**

Currently, the Ministry of Health records the number of participants at each health and wellness event. It is in the process of consolidating various forms from all units to capture pre and post intervention information to create a standardized feedback tool. A standard mechanism for evaluating school health programmes is being developed for consideration by the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of the 2020 fiscal year.

**3. To examine the effectiveness of the School Nutrition Programme in the reduction of childhood obesity:**

**A. That the MoE give consideration to partnering with the MoH to implement a pilot study in which a sample of obese SNP recipients and their families are monitored over time to examine how receipt of school meals impacts students':**

- I. Food preferences and attitudes;
- II. Nutrition intake; and
- III. BMI.

The outcomes of this initiative are likely to align with the Management and Control objective of the CARPHA Plan of Action for Healthy Weights which aims to, "provide children and families who are affected by overweight/obesity with the necessary care and support," and the Strategic Information objective which aims to, "provide core data for tracking the movement and determinant of the epidemic."

**Response:**

The CARPHA Plan of Action for Healthy Weights has now evolved to a new strategic plan called, “The Road Map on Multi-Sectoral Action in Countries to Prevent Childhood Obesity through improved Food and Nutrition Security”.

The MoH will partner with MoE and CARPHA to ensure monitoring of specific objectives under this particular strategic plan. At present, training/retraining of Nutrition Coordinators has begun.