Britain debates “sugar tax” to fight obesity

The United Kingdom is considering a “sugar tax” to reduce sugar intake and help tackle its obesity epidemic. The recommendation was made by Public Health England (PHE), the government’s advisory body on health.

“A duty on sugar is a fundamental pillar of the sugar-reduction strategy,” says Dr. Simon Capewell, vice president of health policy at the UK Faculty of Public Health.

Still, he warns, much more is need to address the problem. “There is no magic bullet to reducing sugar consumption,” he says. “One thing alone in isolation won’t have a huge effect.”

Public Health England identified sugar as one of the main culprits behind Britain’s rise in obesity. About 25% of English adults and 28% of Scottish adults are obese, compared to 18% in Canada, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

In its report, PHE states that increasing prices on high-sugar products by a minimum of 10%–20% is needed to reduce the amount of sugar Britons consume, alongside other actions such as reducing price promotions and cutting the amount of sugar in food. Based on

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Public Health England says that a 10%–20% price increase on high-sugar products is needed to have an impact on public health.

sugar tax are also key to a successful sugar-reduction strategy.

Public opinion on the idea of a sugar tax is shifting, according to Capewell. “The majority of parents are angry that their kids are being made fat,” he says. Parents are worried about the amount

and that will eventually drive him to support a sugar tax. “It’s a matter of when, not if. It’s going to happen.”

For its part, the British food and drink industry dismisses the need for a sugar tax. “We do not agree that the international evidence supports the introduction of a sugar tax and for this reason would oppose such a move,” Ian Wright, director general of the Food and Drink Federation, told *The Telegraph*.

MacGregor, however, is dismissive of that response, pointing to the strength of the scientific evidence outlined in PHE’s report and other research. The federation’s response is “complete rubbish,” he says, noting that the food and drink industry’s tactics to discredit scientific evidence are reminiscent of those employed in the past by the tobacco industry. — Michael Colborne, Edmonton, Alta.

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evidence from five other countries that have implemented a sugar tax, PHE argues that this initiative will reduce consumption at least in the short term and likely beyond.

A 20% tax could substantially reduce sugar consumption and also generate a large amount of revenue, according to Dr. Graham MacGregor, chair of Action on Sugar, a group of UK health specialists concerned with sugar and its effects on health. But, like Capewell, MacGregor stresses that a tax alone is not enough to substantially reduce sugar consumption. “It’s the one that gets the most publicity,” he says, but notes other actions alongside a

of sugar hidden in junk food and are more supportive of the idea of a sugar tax when told that the revenues generated will go towards reducing sugar consumption, he says.

However, the person whose opinion matters most, British Prime Minister David Cameron, has already rejected the idea. “The prime minister’s view remains that he doesn’t see a need for a tax on sugar,” a spokesperson told *The Guardian* upon the report’s release in October.

But Capewell is optimistic Cameron will change his tune. Cameron is keen to leave a legacy of having successfully tackled childhood obesity, says Capewell,

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