

Supporting healthcare professionals in their war against obesity

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The European Commission published a Green paper in December 2005 entitled 'Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, chronic diseases.' The opening statement which describes the state of play at European level, reads as follows: Unhealthy diets and lack of physical activity are the leading causes of avoidable illness and premature death in Europe, and the rising prevalence of obesity across Europe is a major public health concern.¹ The latter statement perfectly describes the situation in our country; a situation which needs to be seriously addressed and tackled on a number of fronts.

This document proceeds to highlight a number of areas for action, one of which is the intervention by health care professionals aimed at improving patients' understanding of the relations between diet, physical activity and health and introducing necessary lifestyle changes. Health care professionals are encouraged to offer advice to patients and their families on the benefits of optimal diets and increased levels of physical activity on routine contacts with patients.

Based on The European Commission's latter recommendation, The Malta College of Pharmacy Practice felt the need to publish a special Journal supplement dedicated to nutrition. The aims of this publication are to (i) highlight nutritional issues, especially the problem of obesity, (ii) support the country's policy in this area (iii) increase the awareness of health care professionals and (iv) provide health care professionals with the necessary practical information on which to base their routine interventions

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related to weight management. The ultimate aim is however, for health care professionals to have a sustained positive impact on society.

Together with two guest editors, who are both pharmacists and nutritionists, a multidisciplinary team was invited to contribute to this supplement. The editorial by Gauden Galea, who has recently been appointed to the top post of Coordinator, Health Promotion within the World Health Organisation, has emphasised the leadership position of the pharmacist in health care and the duty of the pharmacist as health promoter. A leading international Public Health expert, Geof Rayner, provides an excellent overview of the challenge of tackling obesity. The paper provides us with significant food for thought, promoting both governmental action as well as stating that the policy should be 'owned' by the population. While addressing childhood obesity in Malta, Victor Grech also discusses the costs of obesity; an important aspect which requires serious consideration in the debate. Josanne Vassallo gives a comprehensive review of the pathogenesis of obesity, including recent findings and highlights the genetics of obesity.

A very practical paper by Roberta Borg Costanzi provides us with the tools for routine interventions to be performed in overweight individuals. This paper explains how the simple action of measuring waist circumference provides an even better indicator of cardiovascular risk than the more complex calculation of body mass index. Vanessa Bugeja reports findings of an evaluation of a weight reduction programme indicating that the model used was successful in empowering people to change their eating habits and lifestyle. In cases of morbid obesity, diet and lifestyle change may not be sufficiently effective. Eileen Vella presents the pharmacological options currently available to achieve weight loss in the latter situation. The estimated prevalence of diabetes mellitus in Malta is 11.6%, putting us in the top tier of the EU 25.² Hence the importance and relevance of the paper by Mario Caruana which reviews the nutritional recommendations for people with diabetes.

Other nutritional aspects are addressed in this publication and these include the paper by Corinne Bowman regarding the administration of drugs to patients with swallowing difficulties. This paper mainly

highlights the problems associated with patients who need to use an enteral feeding tube and also includes an interesting section on drug-food interactions. Nutritional supplements are widely available and in high demand by the general public. Mario Sammut examines the evidence supporting the use of combined oral glucosamine and chondroitin in osteoarthritis. While the results are encouraging, further study is warranted in this area.

This publication should serve to motivate readers into action. Health care professionals should contribute to our community by taking up the challenge and being proactive in this area. They should lead by example, 'own' the country's policies and intervene at every possible opportunity.

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