

Opinion & Analysis

Obesity epidemic has potential to bankrupt State



JOHN GIBBONS

Societal failures that have created a toxic food environment, for children especially, must be addressed

ANYONE ON the lookout for portents of widescale system failure need never attend an environmental conference. All you have to do instead is walk down the street in any Irish city or town to see at first hand the crisis that is playing out in the bodies of up to a million people in Ireland today.

It's a slow-moving disaster that threatens not just the lives of the people so affected, but has the potential to destroy our health system and quite literally bankrupt the State.

That calamity is obesity. Today, some 24 per cent of Ireland's population is obese. With our consumption patterns, as Mary Harney once famously remarked, "more Boston than Berlin" medical professionals are predicting that within 20 years, one in two Irish people will be obese, in line with the rampant epidemic in the US.

Obesity is the driver of a range of life-threatening "lifestyle" diseases. Specialist Dr Donal O'Shea told a conference in Dublin last week that pouring funding into cardiology, cancer and dementia without tackling the epidemic that is fuelling these conditions would be "a disaster".

The obesity epidemic is at once complex yet extraordinarily simple. Obese people are, in essence, behaving normally in a sick social

environment. Or as the *British Medical Journal* put it: "The driving force for the increasing prevalence of obesity in populations is the increasingly obesogenic environment rather than any 'pathology' in individuals." This is a startling assertion.

In common with all other species, humans instinctively conserve energy, using just as much as we need to feed and breed. Our physiology was simply never designed to cope with having unlimited access to high-energy fats and sugars that today are embedded in the foods that pervade our lives. Nor were we physiologically designed to be able to get by with minimal mechanical effort. More and more cars mean less and less exercise.

Doctors can tinker around the edges, but this is first and foremost an immense social failure. The paradox is that this is a failure of success, the bitter fruit of decades of ever more sophisticated marketing of both foods and lifestyle that pits the marketing might of some of the world's biggest corporations in a hopelessly unequal battle against the individual good and public health in general.

Take high-fructose corn syrup. This is a cheap agricultural byproduct widely used in soft drinks such as Coca Cola, as well as a sweetener in many other processed foods.

High-calorie products devoid of nutritional value can be sold in unlimited quantities to any child

Unlike glucose, which sends a signal to the brain that you are full, consuming calorie-soaked fructose appears to actually leave people feeling hungrier.

It is a tribute to the commercial and political muscle of the junk food and beverage industries that such high-calorie products devoid of nutritional value can be sold in unlimited quantities to any child in the country.

Marketing to children is a minefield of dishonesty. Take the "fun-size" portions of Kellogg's Frosties aimed squarely at very

young children and featuring the loveable Tony the Tiger. One 25g box of Frosties contains 9g of sugar, or close to 40 per cent. Yet the small print says that this is 10 per cent of an adult's guideline daily amount of sugar.

Based on body weight, therefore, this one small serving is likely to deliver over one-third of your child's entire daily sugar requirement. Presenting nutritional information like this is about bamboozling, not informing, people.

The Irish food industry is outraged at proposals from Minister for Communications Eamon Ryan to limit the avalanche of junk food advertising aimed at children. The industry's Consumer Foods Council points to initiatives at self-regulation. As the Frosties example illustrates, voluntary codes are about as successful as voluntary taxes.

If obesity is the disease, television is its principal vector. "Television has turned the American child from the irresistible force into an immovable object," wrote educationalist Laurence J Peter. A study in Liverpool last year found that watching TV ads for food prompts children actually to increase the amount of food they eat. Parents have, as US president-elect Barack Obama reminded us, a responsibility to turn off the TV for their children's sake. Coincidentally, Liverpool City

Council recently banned "happy meals". McDonald's are lobbying to have this ban overturned, fearful others will also outlaw the use of toys as bribes to encourage young children to overeat junk food, while associating this food with play. Any takers on Dublin City Council?

Children are paying a fearful price for our collective societal failures. Apart from the burden of disease, discrimination and disability they face in life, psychological studies of obese children have found their "quality of life" scores to be as low as patients with cancer. So much for happy meals.

It's by no means all bad news. Next year, for instance, sees the roll-out of a €90 million EU-wide scheme to supply free fruit and vegetables to schoolchildren.

We tax cigarettes and alcohol to limit usage and to help pay for the downstream costs to society. The same rationale should apply to junk food, with the tax revenues ring-fenced to make healthier foods more affordable.

Much like burning coal, processed foods laden with salt, sugar and fats are only cheap as long as you don't have to pay to clean up the mess and society, rather than the producers and polluters, continues to pick up the tab.