March 11, 2015

Presentation to the House Ways and Means Committee in favor of taxing sugary beverages in VT

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. I am a practicing pediatrician in Burlington, and the current President of the American Academy of Pediatrics VT Chapter. In the 30 years that I have been in practice, I have seen VT's obesity rate climb steadily from nearly 11% in 1990 to almost 25% today. When you count in the number of Vermonters who are also overweight, this represents over 60% of Vermont's adults and 29% of Vermont's children and youth.

What do I see in my office? Children drinking sugary beverages almost all the time. I see it in the baby's bottles and in the toddlers' sippy cups. Children and adolescents come in toting 20 ounce containers of everything from colas to sweetened iced teas to Gatorade. How have we become such a thirsty nation?

Of course, the obesity epidemic is extremely complicated, and we can't blame it all on sugary beverages. BUT – sugary beverages do play an extremely significant role.

Here are some facts:

- Consumption of sugar sweetened beverages has increased 500% in the past 50 years, and is not the single largest category of caloric intake in children, surpassing milk in the late 1990s
- Sugar sweetened beverages account for at least 1/5 of the weight gained between 1977 and 2007 in the US population
- The American Heart Assoc's dietary sugar intake recommendation is no more than 6 teaspoons per day for women and 9 teaspoons per day for men. A 20 oz Coke has 16.75 tsp of sugar, and a 20 oz Mountain Dew has 19.25 tsp of sugar
- A person who drinks one can (only 12 oz) of soda a day would gain 15 lbs in a year
- Our bodies process liquid sugar differently than sugar in solid food – it moves quickly into the blood stream and delivers more sugar o the body's vital organs than they can handle. Over time, the pancreas and liver can become over-loaded, causing diabetes, heart disease, and liver disease
- Pure liquid sugar also does not "fill us up" or induce satiety, the same way that fast food (that also contains fat and protein) does. These empty calories do not make us feel full. Therefore, there is inadequate calorie compensation - people are more likely to drink these extra calories in addition to other foods they are eating, rather than instead of these foods
- One exception seems to be in children who drink sugar sweetened beverages instead of milk – this does displace the calcium and vitamin D that is in milk, that children need.

What is the burden of obesity from the medical point of view? Well, we all know about diabetes and cardiovascular disease. I do see some diabetes and hypertension in my pediatric practice. But what do I see even more? I see kids who are depressed, I see kids who are bullied at school, I see kids who are truant from school because of the bullying and - they don't want to participate in PE!

What does the research show?

- Children who become overweight as preschoolers tend to stay overweight throughout childhood and into adolescents. Overweight and obese adolescents tend to remain obese as adults. Preventing obesity can be difficult, but it is MUCH easier than treating it!
- Sugar sweetened beverage intake increases weight gain at all ages:
    - DeBoer, Scharf, Demmer in 2013 followed a cohort of over 10,000 young children and showed that sugar sweetened beverage consumption was linked with abnormal weight gain, independent of SES, maternal obesity, and TV viewing (although these are all linked)
    - Pan, Ruowei Li, Park, Galuska – CDC, 2014, followed 1.200 children and found that obesity prevalence at 6 among children who consumed SSBs was twice as high as that among non-SSB consuers (17% vs 8.6%)
    - Previous studies have shown clear links with older children and adolescents
- If you DECREASE SSB intake, keeping everything else the same, you can DECREASE obesity, especially in more obese adolescents! Ebbling, Feldman, Ludwig, 2006, modified the at home consumption of SSBs in 100 adolescents for 25 weeks by delivering non-SSB to their homes (50% of SSB consumption for adolescents happens at home). This decreased their consumption of SSB by over 80%.

Finally, what good would a tax do?

- Studies suggest that a 10% price increase for beverages through taxation would decrease consumption by about 8-10%
- Early data fro Mexico, which imposed and excise tax on sugar-added drinks beginning Jan 2014, demonstrate a 10% decrease in sales of drinks subject to the tax, while sles of healthier alternatives like water and milk increased over the same time period

Why not just educate people?

- There is NOTHING in soda that is good for you. Do people think there is?
- Smoking is bad for you – are there people who think it is good for them?
- Health education and behavior change is complex – it works much better to make the healthier choice the easier (and more economical) choice.