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## Comment on the obesity issue

*Dr. Yach is associate editor of this journal*

*Dear editors,*

*Several editorials and the letter by Vuille in the October edition of the journal document the impact of obesity on public health and suggest a variety of means to address the problem. Arguments are advanced to suggest that educational programs have limited impact; that environmental changes might work; that individuals need to take responsibility for their diets and be more active. In reality, if there was a magic bullet, we would not have a rising tide of obesity in almost all countries except the very poorest. There have been many small scale intervention studies that show some impact, however there has yet to be a community based five to 10 year intervention study that shows which interventions work best. In the absence of solid examples of success, it seems much could be learned from those working on tobacco control.*

*For tobacco control to succeed several elements need to be in place: a comprehensive national program that includes measures aimed at tobacco prices, all forms of marketing, access to treatment for nicotine dependence, provision of smoke-free public places, warnings, as well as public education campaigns and school programs. The programs that are well funded, supported by political leadership, carefully monitored and discussed frequently in the media have yielded substantial gains to public health in developed and developing countries.*

*Not all these elements apply to obesity control. But the principle of comprehensiveness does apply. Diet and physical activity need to be addressed together and separately through interventions aimed at supporting individuals to make “healthy choices easy choices”. This requires many layers of action: individual and family actions; community-based societal responses – in schools, in urban design, in transport systems. Political and policy responses from governments who have a central role in*

*steering other key players to act together. Unlike in the case of the tobacco industry with respect to tobacco deaths, food and related companies can, and are starting to play a more positive role in addressing obesity. We need to push them further and find a common language that allows them to compete among themselves on health grounds. That way health wins and so do innovative and socially responsible companies.*

*One last analogy with tobacco is worth considering. Governments recognised that even if they applied the best tobacco control policies available, cross border marketing and illicit trade, as two examples, would thwart their national efforts. Thus, they have adopted the Framework Convention on Tobacco control, in order to deal with the global aspects of tobacco Control. Similarly there are global dimensions to the obesity epidemic that demand appropriate global responses. The public health community needs to consider which measures will have the impact desired – certainly a convention to address obesity makes no sense. Some global response to marketing to children is needed; better international applied research is required and incentives for food companies to produce “healthier” options are needed.*

*There will be no quick fix; but through experimentation and partnership progress can be made.*

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