



THE SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20201

MAR 21 2003

The Honorable Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20501

Dear Mr. Waxman:

Thank you for your letter regarding the United States (U.S.) Government's comments on the draft report from the Joint World Health Organization (WHO)/Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Expert Consultation on Diet, Nutrition, and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases. I appreciate the time you took to write, specifically about your interest in the Administration's view on the relationship between soft drinks and obesity.

At the outset, I should state that the obesity epidemic in this country is a major concern to me and I speak about it whenever and wherever I can. The causes of obesity are multiple, and diet is certainly a major contributor. With regard to products containing added sugars, we support the position in the current *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* that says, "Intake of a lot of foods high in added sugars, like soft drinks, is of concern. Consuming excess calories from these foods may contribute to weight gain or lower consumption of more nutritious foods."

Our extensive comments on the draft WHO report reflect the importance the United States attaches to a robust disease prevention and health promotion framework domestically. In fiscal year (FY) 2002, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) spent more than \$16.2 billion on prevention activities, including child immunization, health education, food safety and disease prevention. The FY 2004 budget request provides a total of \$17.7 billion for prevention activities. This includes an increase of \$110 million dedicated to a specific prevention initiative, *Steps to a HealthierUS*.

The President's *HealthierUS* initiative, my Department's *Small Steps, Big Rewards* diabetes prevention campaign, the *VERB: It's What You Do* youth media physical activity promotion campaign, and our reinvigorated partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on a *Five-A-Day for Better Health Campaign* are just some of the most recent examples of the Administration's commitment to promote better diets and healthier lifestyles. USDA Secretary Ann Veneman and I recently met with leaders from the food industry to help us combat the U.S. obesity epidemic, and we will engage with others in this fight, including grocery manufacturers, fruit and vegetable growers, the soft drink industry and other industries.

The U.S. is strongly committed to working with the WHO, the FAO, and their Member States in

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the development of a global strategy on diet, physical activity and health, which the World Health Assembly will consider in 2004. In developing a global strategy, it is incumbent upon United Nations organizations, governments and all stakeholders to ensure the strategy is based on the best possible scientific and public health evidence. Equally important, if countries are to embrace the resulting strategy and implement it effectively, the development process must be transparent and participatory, and incorporate a range of public and private sector partners who can be part of sustainable solutions and long-term strategies.

The issues surrounding diet, nutrition, and the prevention of chronic diseases are extremely complex. The first draft of the WHO/FAO report contained conclusions that were inconsistent with the body of evidence. For example, the expert consultation considered "probable," the evidence that sugar-sweetened soft drinks and juices increase the risk of obesity even though there has been only one longitudinal study that has supported this association. According to the expert consultants' own criteria, this recommendation should have been considered "insufficient" because only one study supported the association.

The draft report also highlighted key areas for intervention strategies that require additional study to provide the quality of evidence needed before launching global food and nutrition policy recommendations of the magnitude anticipated.

The U.S. has much to contribute to this global debate, as reflected in our substantial response to both the WHO and the FAO regarding the draft report. As you will see from the enclosed response from the WHO, they very much appreciated our contribution, especially the scientific and epidemiological evidence we provided.

The WHO did not view our submission as critical of the draft report but rather, as evidence of a Member State's commitment to strengthen the science of the document and the larger global strategy development process. I recently met with Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General of the WHO, who expressed her appreciation for the U.S. Government's submission. She reiterated that the WHO's role is to provide Member States with the best possible evidence so that governments and their partners can develop the policies and recommendations necessary to effect sustainable changes at the country level to promote health and improve health outcomes.

The U.S. Government's response reflected the views of a wide range of individual experts in the areas of diet, nutrition, obesity, physical activity, chronic disease and others, including Dr. William Dietz of the Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention within HHS. You should know that after the release of the draft report, Dr. Dietz requested that the WHO delete his name from the document, citing concerns with the lack of evidence used to develop the recommendations.

Our scientific and policy experts at HHS and across the U.S. Government remain committed to working with the WHO to help ensure the best possible science and evidence is a cornerstone of

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the 2004 global strategy. Sound science must provide the basis for developing international policies and for resolving possible differences of opinion. We continue to believe that the WHO and the FAO must adopt a comprehensive approach in which qualified experts rigorously and objectively evaluate the science in a transparent manner and clearly articulate the basis for conclusions and recommendations, reflecting internal consistency and scientific rigor. In this way, the resulting global strategy will be one that can truly help make a difference in the lives of individuals through improved diet and nutrition, increased physical activity and healthier lifestyles.

Thank you for your continued commitment and interest in the fight against the obesity epidemic here and abroad. The WHO/FAO global strategy on diet, physical activity and health holds much promise in the fight against the global epidemic of obesity and the increasing global chronic disease burden, and I look forward to joining with you to promote healthier lifestyles among the American people.

Please call me if you have any further thoughts or questions.

Sincerely,



Tommy G. Thompson

Enclosure

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION



ORGANISATION MONDIALE DE LA SANTE

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In reply please refer to: NPH/PP.mh
 Prière de rappeler la référence:

Dr William R. Steiger
 Special Assistant to the Secretary for International
 Affairs
 Department of Health and Human Services
 Office of International Affairs
 Washington DC 20201
 USA

Your reference:
 Votre référence:

18 October 2002

Bill -

Dear Dr Steiger,

Thank you very much for your letter of 3 July 2002 regarding the draft report of the WHO/FAO Joint Expert Consultation on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases (28 January – 1 February 2002).

The holding of the Expert Consultation on Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases was very timely and much needed as there have been very rapid scientific developments within the last decade. As a consequence, epidemiological evidence that indicates the important role of diet in preventing increasing rates of disability and premature death due to noncommunicable diseases in both developing and developed countries has greatly expanded. In addition, the identification how specific dietary components that have a role in the etiology of these diseases has developed, and new reports and guidelines have been developed and published by various governmental bodies and professional organizations, such as the new US report on "Dietary Reference Intakes (DRIs) for Energy, Carbohydrate, Fibre, Fat, Fatty Acids, Cholesterol, Protein and Amino Acids" released early September 2002 by the US Food and Nutrition Board, Institute of Medicine of the National Academies.

Therefore, updated scientific evidence and recommendations by WHO/FAO are urgently needed for assisting Member States in developing effective prevention and management strategies to address the increasing public health challenge related to diet, physical activity and health. Furthermore, as requested by the 55th World Health Assembly (WHA55.23), WHO has initiated the process for developing the Global Strategy on diet, physical activity and health, which will be presented at the 113th Session of the Executive Board in January 2004.

cc: Mr David Hohman, Health Attaché, United States Mission to the United Nations
 Office and other International Organizations at Geneva

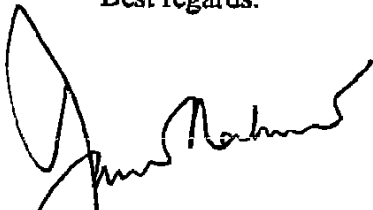
Dr William R Steiger
Washington DC, USA

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We are very grateful for the fact that the US Government is giving a great importance to this report by setting up the Interagency Working Group on diet, nutrition and physical activity to bring together the concerned nutrition and policy experts to review the draft report in a comprehensive manner. At a meeting with the Expert Consultation bureau members (i.e. Chair, Vice Chair and two rapporteurs) held in Geneva on 19-20 August 2002, 121 comments received from Member States, scientific community, health professional organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and industry, were reviewed for consideration. Currently the draft report is being revised for its finalization and it is planned that the final report will be published as a WHO Technical Report Series (TRS) in early 2003.

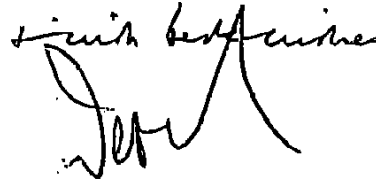
We look forward to our continued collaboration and working together with the US Government in the fight against the increasing global burden of chronic diseases.

Best regards.



David Nabarro
Executive Director
Sustainable Development and
Healthy Environments

Yours sincerely,



Derek Yach
Executive Director
Noncommunicable Diseases and
Mental Health