



Diabetes is a unique disease



The diabetes epidemic is at last attracting more media attention, this is good news. However, it nearly always seems to be exclusively linked to ‘obesity’.

Obesity is the headline grabber, along with our apparent addiction to fattening and unhealthy food and lack of physical activity. Children are brought up on a commercial diet of un-nutritious food, and pass their time in front of computer games and television. The conclusion always seems to be similar; obesity followed by a list of diseases – somewhere at the end of which is diabetes and often not distinguishing type 1 from type 2. It does seem that the message has become obscured: not all people with diabetes are obese and not all people with obesity develop diabetes.

Publicity about obesity is very welcome! It most definitely is helpful in directing those who plan our cities, devise school meals for children, and shape public services to take preventive health care into account. Another positive outcome is that the food industry is slowly becoming more accountable to a better-educated consumer. New EU legislation aims to ensure reliable and accurate information on food labelling as part of the drive to combat obesity in member states. This has come about as a result of lobbying by pressure groups and is proof that the public eventually has a voice.¹ As consumers we do have a choice in how we allow the environment to shape our lives. Change is happening: fast food outlets are now closing across Europe more rapidly than they are being opened as people are making healthier eating choices. Personally I think this is a good thing and publicity about obesity must be working.

The Vienna Conference on Prevention of Type 2 diabetes highlighted the need for more action and for major resources to be diverted to help change lifestyles to prevent type 2 diabetes.² It's better to make the changes now – even if rather late – than never at all. This conference made a significant statement, very specific to diabetes, to take to EU Health Ministers about how this disease should be tackled at a political level.

The effective visual impact of the obesity campaign seems to me to sometimes give the impression that all cases of diabetes are always connected with obesity, which of course is not true. Diabetes is a complex and complicated disease, the aetiology of which is still not completely understood. The consequences of type 1 and type 2 diabetes are complex and diverse, complicated to treat, deadly if left unchecked and the treatments available are not as effective as clinicians would wish. A recent

report³ found that ‘In particular, more than a third of people with diabetes are unaware they will have the condition for life and half don't know that diabetes can reduce their life expectancy.’ If this is the state of knowledge of people with the disease, I wonder about the level of knowledge in the general public?

Better diet and more exercise are important, but they are only part of the picture, which includes genetics and other triggers of immune system. It is insulting to people who have developed diabetes who are made to feel as if their disease was their ‘fault’ or the fault of their parents.

More research is still needed into the causes and consequences of type 1 and type 2 diabetes, how to best manage the disease and how to prevent its complications. Research funding always falls short of what is needed, and for some reason diabetes is still seen as less worthy or less interesting than other diseases. We have all heard people say things like type 2 diabetes being ‘just a mild disease that old people get’ or ‘diabetes is treated with insulin and then people are fine’ (I suspect that I am not the only EDN reader who has been irritated by such comments).

But in the ‘communication on proposals’, the European Union does seem to diminish the importance of diabetes by listing ‘diabetes/obesity’ apparently by a stroke of the pen. This has prompted diabetes researchers to speak out.⁴

As professionals we have a responsibility to shape the public perception of diabetes. We have come a long way and diabetes is higher up the political and societal agenda. However, we need to maintain pressure to keep diabetes recognised as a unique disease that requires unique political responses.

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