

Editorial

Nutrition and educational attainment

The UK government have become very pre-occupied with the nutrition of school children. The Department for Education has declared that, 'The government is committed to ensuring that children are provided with the healthy food and nutrients they require during the school day, not just aid their physical health but to ensure they can study hard and behave well'. This has been a political response to a concerted campaign from many people concerned about the deterioration in the nutritional content of school meals. Indeed, a high profile campaign by a media chef, Jamie Oliver, has particularly focused attention on the poor quality of school meals.

As a consequence, the first reactions from the government have been to ban the sale of fizzy drinks and confectioneries in school vending machines. It has been recommended that this should be replaced with more healthy foods of which one group particularly identified were peanuts and tree nuts.

There is little doubt that peanuts and tree nuts are a good nutritional source. However, as always when politicians attempt to dictate the behaviour of local institutions and individuals, there is clearly a downside to the recommendation. They have failed to account for the increasing prevalence of peanut and tree nut allergy. Introducing vending machines containing these foods into schools will pose a significant threat to allergy sufferers. Despite representations from groups representing allergy sufferers, the UK government have failed to heed the concerns.

The latest good intentioned approach of the UK government is now to investigate the educational benefits of a fish oil supplement in schools. Through the Food Standards Agency, they have conducted a systematic review looking at the effects of omega 3 and 6 fish oil supplements. They have even established an onsite trial to identify whether supplementation will improve the behaviour of children. Should these trials suggest improvement, there is a significant potential that there will be further legislation on nutrition in schools. It will be interesting to see whether this will have any favourable impact in relation to allergy.

There is no doubting the good intentions of the above actions. Furthermore, there is also no doubt that good nutrition is imperative to ensure optimal growth and development. There is clear evidence that behaviour and education attainment can be modified by optimizing nutrition. However, this will not be achieved by focusing exclusively on school meals. What is required is a far greater effort in health promotion for the whole community. Until the whole population is convinced of the need to change their dietary habits, the impact merely concentrated on schools will be very small. Furthermore, unless recommendations take account of significant minorities that might be adversely affected, then the whole strategy will be doomed to failure.

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