

H.E.  
Marc DANZON, M.D.  
Regional Director  
W.H.O. Europe

Dear Sir,

The ROMANIAN MINISTRY OF HEALTH expresses its support and gratitude for the development of the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.

ROMANIA supports the strategy and finds it important and essential to global health promotion. The Background to the Strategy expresses the need for global collaboration in order to tackle the global etiology and outcomes. Chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, stroke, cancers and respiratory diseases account for 59% of the 56.5 million disease-related deaths annually, and much of the global disease burden is related to diet. While the U.S., with 65% of adults overweight, is the world leader, the problem of obesity is global. In 1995, an estimated 200 million obese adults lived worldwide. By 2000, that number has increased to over 300 million. It is well known that the poor are at the highest risk for NCDs. To promote health in these sectors, global efforts and investments should be made.

Nutritionists and other health professionals in ROMANIA have examined this issue. We must emphasize that we should search for more research and evidence and collaborate with all the international scientists, but we do find the current evidence extremely strong and we do have a firm basis for the needed strategy, its tools and actions. At the same time, Romania recommends monitoring the scientific data and advances over time, after the adoption of the Strategy.

It is true that the strategy was developed to address NCDs. Nevertheless, the tools presented in the strategy should be applied to address micronutrient deficiencies and undernutrition, as well. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the obesity epidemic is not restricted to industrialized societies. In developing countries, it is estimated that over 115 million people suffer from obesity-related health problems. Moreover, it is well documented that even obese people could have micronutrient deficiencies. Consumption of high nutrient density foods and a wholesome diet are needed to both decrease the rate of NCDs and combat micronutrient deficiencies.

In Romania there is a wide use of marketing techniques. The industry recognizes that good marketing techniques lead to greater consumption of products, greater profit and frequently, overconsumption. Children, deluged with marketing messages targeted especially to them, are misled. The effect of health promoting messages is being diluted by the mass marketing of the food

companies. Ministries of health and other partners who are engaged in health education cannot compete with the budget used by the industry for marketing.

Unhealthy food items are cheaper than healthier food in Romania also. Thus, the poor get the worst of choices. Healthy diet is not accessible to them and thus, education and labeling cannot suffice. In fact, the poorest member of societies are actually encouraged to make unhealthy choices because the least healthy choices are the only ones they can afford. In the current global environment, taxation and pricing ("price control") are tools to increase the accessibility of people from low socioeconomic status to a more healthier diet.

When unhealthy foods are subsidized, they are consumed by the population to a higher degree. Romania supports linking agricultural policy, including subsidy programs, to the health of our population. A gradual and well coordinated change can have a minimal negative impact on the farmers and on economics, while making a substantial effect on health. These policies can change the preferences of farmers and hence, promote health even better.

We do agree with the importance of individual responsibility, but emphasize that public strategies and actions are needed to make the healthier choices accessible, easier and more natural. This is especially important for children, who cannot decide themselves. Also, many families have no access to healthier foods and thus, putting all the burden on the family is impractical. In health promotion and public health policy, both incentives and restrictive measures are essential. We find the Strategy balanced and credible in this aspects.

Some claim that there are no "good" or "bad foods" and that there are only "good" or "bad diets". In fact, food companies spend enormous amounts of money on marketing, because they want people to eat more of their products. The produced food items are not tailored pieces in a puzzle and are not intended to form a healthy diet. Each food industry markets its products. In Romania we are promoting food items and not only a good diet. Subsequently, we consider the Strategy as an important tool for us.

From our experience in Romania, it is clear that the industry, when being guided by the health authorities, has the willingness and the capabilities needed to promote health. It is better when food companies appreciate their responsibility and their ability in promoting health. But in Romania, industry is not involved in national tasks like fighting obesity, decreasing salt, decreasing fat and sugar content of food items, etc. Some companies do not even seem to be expected to share the responsibility for the outcome when the populations consume their products.

A global WHO strategy would be of great support to many countries, including Romania .

We agree that a this Strategy can make the right environment that will empower people to resume responsibility for their health. The strategy is a lever that mobilizes national policy and creates the conditions that motivate and change attitudes and behaviors of the individuals. The Strategy, with its menu-like offering of tools, provides the member states with the options to use in their settings.

Again, we thank the WHO-secretariat and will make all the efforts needed to promote healthy diet, physical activity and health and to reduce NCDs.

DR.OVIDIU BRANZAN

MINISTER OF HEALTH