



Brussels, 04/08/11

Open Letter

To the attention of Mr György Matolcsy, Minister for Economy,  
Dr. Miklós Szócska, Minister for Health

Dear Sirs,

I am writing to you in response to the vote that took place on Monday 11 July 2011, which introduces a tax on a variety of unhealthy products. The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Hungarian government for its willingness to take a bold step forward in the fight against overweight, obesity and diet-related diseases.

Like many European countries, Hungary is greatly affected by the burden of obesity. Patterns in Europe have led to a situation whereby one in four people suffer from the condition and one in two people are overweight. In parallel, chronic non communicable diseases, including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes type 2 and cancer are increasingly widespread, accounting for 86% of deaths in the WHO European Region<sup>1</sup>. Looking beyond the health impact of such a burden, there is also an economic perspective that must be considered. For example, cardio-vascular diseases, which are partly diet-related, cost the EU economy in excess of €192 billion a year<sup>2</sup>.

The main risk factors for overweight, obesity and diet-related diseases are known and are largely modifiable. Poor diet and a lack of sufficient physical activity result in a situation whereby energy intake exceeds the amount being expended in our day-to-day lives. At a population level, food consumption is driven by price, availability and marketing. Over the last few years, we have witnessed an increasing consumption of products high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) available at a cheap price and made more attractive due to sophisticated marketing techniques that contribute to the worsening of the situation. In supermarkets, people are challenged: buying energy-dense foods available at a cheap price or choosing the healthy option: i.e buying fruits and vegetables that are more expensive.

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<sup>1</sup> Gaining Health – The European Strategy for Prevention and Control of Non-communicable diseases. WHO, EUR/RC56/8+EUR/RC56/Conf.doc/3 30th June 2006

<sup>2</sup> European Heart Network (2008) European cardiovascular disease statistics 2008

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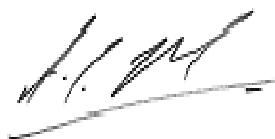
The link between the price of a product and its purchase is clear and has been well substantiated scientifically. Furthermore, the proposed tax may lead to an increase in reformulation efforts, resulting in the wider availability of healthier options. In this context, your recent vote and the soon-to-be implemented tax on certain types of unhealthy products is particularly welcomed by the European public health community.

Combined with health promotion measures designed to increase awareness of the health issues associated with a poor diet, the impact of fiscal measures applied to food policy can be significant. EPHA would also recommend that the Hungarian government consider using other pricing mechanisms or subsidies to make the healthy options of fruit, vegetables, wholegrain cereals and pulses more widely available and affordable.

The European Public Health Alliance has consistently advocated to counter the level of overweight and obesity around Europe. In line with the 2003 World Health Organization's Recommendations as well as with publications from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)<sup>3</sup> the Hungarian proposal represents clearly a step in the right direction.

EPHA wishes you every success in the implementation of this initiative and hopes that this will lead other countries in Europe to take positive action to tackle this issue.

Yours sincerely,



Archie Turnbull, President  
European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)

*EPHA is the European Platform bringing together public health organisations representing health professionals, patients groups, health promotion and disease specific NGOs, academic groupings and other health associations.*

*This document arises from the European Public Health Alliance (EPHA). Sole responsibility for this document lies with EPHA and the Executive Agency is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.*

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<sup>3</sup> « The Economic of Prevention – Fit not fat » 2010, Franco Sassi

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