

## School dinners: a healthy choice?

In a recent speech at the British Medical Association's conference in Brighton, UK, Andrew Lansley, Health Secretary in the new coalition government, dared to argue that the "Jamie Oliver approach" would not help tackle public health problems such as obesity and smoking. Lansley noted that there had been a fall in the number of children eating school dinners after Oliver's public campaign to improve the nutritional value of food provided in schools. He concluded that lecturing parents and their children would result in an alienation that could ultimately be counterproductive to public health. That said, more recent figures from the UK Government's School Food Trust show that uptake of school dinners has gone up slightly for the past 2 years, increasing to 39.3% of primary school pupils and 35.1% of secondary school pupils.

In 2004, Jamie Oliver, a UK celebrity chef, launched a campaign—the Food for Life Partnership—to ban nutritionally poor food from being served in school canteens, as well as to promote fresh and nutritious fare. In September, 2006, Oliver published his manifesto for school dinners with support from the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, who committed £280 million to improving school meal standards. Strategies in the manifesto included recruiting and training new cookery teachers; empowering head teachers of schools to make every school a junk food free zone; educating parents and helping them to understand the basics of family cooking and responsible nutrition; and investing in dinner ladies with proper training and enough paid hours to cook food using fresh ingredients.

It is not as though there is a lack of research on strategies that can be used to manage weight and diet in children. Indeed, the available evidence backs several elements of Oliver's approach. In the recent HEALTHY cluster-randomised study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, for example, a multicomponent school-based intervention that included improved physical education and classroom activities to promote behaviour change provided some evidence for reduced adiposity in schoolchildren at risk of obesity and type 2 diabetes.

Further evidence of the need for approaches like Oliver's is provided by a recent annual obesity report published by

two US public health groups—Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. This report bolsters a new survey of parental attitudes towards obesity in their children, which showed an increasing awareness of being fat and its threat to public health. It seems that 84% of parents believe their children are at a healthy weight, even though nearly 30% of schoolchildren and teenagers are judged to be obese or overweight. Other surveys confirm that childhood obesity is an important and growing issue in the USA. The new survey also noted that blood pressure has become an important consequence for children who develop obesity. While high blood pressure is generally considered an adult medical problem, its increasing prevalence in schoolchildren and teenagers is putting young people at risk of diseases such as coronary heart disease and stroke.

In an echo of the Oliver-Blair project, a Comment in *The Lancet* today by Cécile Knai and colleagues draws attention to DRINC, a UK research initiative aimed at designing foods with improved nutritional value. Although 90% of the funding for the £10 million 5-year project is to come from the public purse, the prominent involvement of large multinational food and drink companies in the partnership raises questions about the balance of possible benefits between public health on the one hand and the companies' businesses on the other. In principle it is attractive for public initiatives to make judicious use of resources and skills from the private sector, but in practice great care needs to be taken that expectations and outcomes are clearly defined and transparently provide a benefit to the public.

It is perhaps not surprising that Andrew Lansley is seeking to make a break from decisions made by the previous administration. Yet he is in danger of distracting attention from the very real public health risks posed by the relentless growth of obesity and diabetes. Even in the course of today's severe financial belt-tightening, the UK's leaders should avoid gratuitous and unhelpful public statements. Instead, they should devote their energies to framing a forward-looking health policy—one that offers clear and tangible support to effective education for families on how important a good diet is to their children's growth, health, and future. ■ *The Lancet*



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For **Jamie Oliver's manifesto** see [http://www.jamieoliver.com/media/jo\\_sd\\_manifesto.pdf?phpMyAdmin=06af156b76166043e2845ee292db12ee](http://www.jamieoliver.com/media/jo_sd_manifesto.pdf?phpMyAdmin=06af156b76166043e2845ee292db12ee)

For the **HEALTHY** study see *N Engl J Med* 2010; published online June 27. DOI:10.1056/NEJMoa1001933

For the **annual obesity report** see <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2010/Obesity2010Report.pdf>