

THE STRAITS TIMES

Week's Top Letter #2: Better education will boost efforts to fight diabetes



🕒 PUBLISHED DEC 14, 2018, 11:13 PM SGT

Given the medical and economic costs associated with diabetes - and the alarming statistic that one in four Singaporeans already has diabetes or is at high risk of contracting it - few would disagree with the proposals by the Ministry of Health (MOH) to take tougher actions (War on diabetes will have effect on 'innocent' bystanders; Dec 6).

These include banning and taxing high sugar drinks, disallowing their advertisements, or stipulating prominent labels on them.

Yet absent from the discourse is an evaluation and communication of how these proposals and their effects may vary based either on Ministry of Health (MOH) projections or case studies from abroad. Other considerations are the effectiveness of past and ongoing campaigns to increase awareness of excessive sugar consumption and of diabetes, and the persistence of these campaigns in the future.

In the context of a public consultation exercise, the perceptions of the Singaporean public are likely to be shaped by their past beliefs or habits they grew up with, or based on what is most convenient to their personal interests as opposed to that of the collective.

It should be noted that these may not necessarily be grounded in facts.

Hence, teasing out the differences between both sides and deciding on the policy, as a result, will be fraught with difficulties.

This is compounded by the observation that pre-packaged sugar-sweetened drinks are not the only source of high-sugar consumption, and any attempt to extend taxation or regulation to the other sources would not be as straightforward.

The potential consensus lies in the acknowledgement of the importance of awareness or education programmes to make Singaporeans not only more cognisant of diabetes and the concerns around sugar consumption, but also to nudge them to make more active decisions for themselves.

A useful starting point would be to find out the demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds of those living with pre-diabetes or diabetes, together with the lifestyle habits and activities which could be correlated with the disease.

Subsequent research questions could include an understanding of these people's daily dietary patterns and what they think about the campaigns launched by MOH or other public health agencies, to further improve the messages and their delivery.

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