

Tax needed on sugary drinks; There is strong evidence that sugar-sweetened beverages contribute to obesity and other health problems

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Most of us accept that taxes are necessary to fund the government programs that we value, such as social services, education and health care. The lion's share of provincial tax revenue is spent on health care, and British Columbians approve of taxation to fund this program and of extra taxes for products that drive up health care costs, such as tobacco.

Tobacco taxes dissuade consumption by increasing the product's price and the resulting revenue helps the province recoup the dollars spend on treating tobacco-induced illness. The recent demise of the HST has presented us with the opportunity to use the principles of tobacco taxation in the battle against obesity.

Unhealthy weights are a significant factor in the development of hypertension and stroke, heart disease, some cancers and most cases of Type 2 diabetes. Obesity-related illness costs the province over \$450 million per year and causes hundreds of deaths. The development of unhealthy weights is the result of an excess of calories consumed compared to calories expended in physical activity. Tax policy should be used in efforts to reverse this situation.

While no single product is responsible for excess weight gain, there is very strong evidence that sugar-sweetened beverages are particularly problematic and that reducing their consumption would be of major benefit. Sugary drinks are ubiquitous, inexpensive and consumed in large quantities by many Canadians.

According to recent Canadian and American studies, up to 20 per cent of obesity can be attributed to sugary drink consumption.

Sugary drinks are uniquely linked to excess weight gain, as unlike calories from solid food, the body tends not to feel full when fed liquid calories.

In fact, there is evidence that many people will eat more solid food after drinking sugary drinks than they would have had they drunk water.

This is especially troublesome for a product marketed as a thirst quencher to be consumed with meals. In addition, sugary drinks are linked to hypertension, hyperlipidemia and Type 2 diabetes even in individuals of normal weight.

Many organizations concerned with health promotion, such as the B.C. Medical Association, the Canadian Medical Association, Dietitians of Canada, Canadian Diabetes Association and the BC Healthy Living Alliance, have recognized the importance of reducing sugary drink consumption. Most have recommended that government place an extra tax on these products.

A tax on sugary drinks will decrease consumption of these products and this will have positive effects on the health of British Columbians.

Moreover, such a tax would enhance personal responsibility, as those who drive up health care costs as a result of consuming sugary drinks would also contribute a greater amount to tax revenue. The tax revenue could also be used for health promotion.

As B.C. revises its tax structure postharmonized sales tax, Finance Minister Kevin Falcon has invited British Columbians to bring their thoughts on taxation forward to government. Now is the time to consider the value of reducing taxes on health-promoting goods and services such as bicycles, sporting goods and gym memberships and increasing the taxes on clearly unhealthy products such as sugary drinks.

We encourage all British Columbians

to consider how tax policy can be improved after the demise of the HST and to express their views to their MLA.

We then need to hold government accountable to ensure revenue generated from a new tax on sugary drinks is used in a manner that derives the most social benefit possible.

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