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EXPLOSIVE PROBLEM

BY HILARY ACHAUER

Nationally recognized experts gathered Nov. 13 to discuss the sugar-fueled diabetes epidemic that's costing billions.





Xavier Morales



Michael Long

The obesity epidemic that began about **15 years ago** has resulted in a new health crisis: a diabetes epidemic.

In a Nov. 13 forum at National University in La Jolla, California, a panel of nationally recognized experts gathered to talk about ways to reduce the impact of sugar-sweetened beverages. Each of the speakers—including a scientist, public-health experts and a community activist—talked about the terrifying increase in the incidence of diabetes.

“Diabetes rates have tripled in 30 years,” said panel moderator Harold Goldstein, founder and executive director of the California Center for Public Health Advocacy. “It’s the primary driver of increased health-care costs in the United States.”

While sugar-sweetened beverages—soda, juices, sports drinks—are not the only cause of skyrocketing obesity and diabetes rates, they are the primary culprit, Goldstein said.

“Half of all the sugar we consume comes from sugar-sweetened beverages,” he said.

Each expert who took the floor agreed: The crisis that threatens to overwhelm our health-care system will not be stopped without a fight.

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—Harold Goldstein

Emergency Call to Action

“When I talk to people in my community and ask, ‘Do you have diabetes?’ they answer ... ‘not yet.’ It’s an expectation,” said Xavier Morales, executive director of the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California and a longtime advocate for health equity and environmental justice. Morales holds a doctorate in city and regional planning from Cornell, and he was a leader in the recent movement to institute a **soda tax** in Berkeley, California.

Treating diabetes is costing California **US\$27.6 billion** each year, Morales said.

“I don’t understand why we aren’t calling a state of emergency on this,” Morales said. “If another country was inflicting this type of damage on our country, what would we do? We’d go to war.”

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—Harold Goldstein

Goldstein feels public policy is crucial in the fight against obesity and diabetes.

“Our job as participants in democracy is to change the rules of the game. When the rules are such that people are dying and the health of our country is going to collapse ... we are literally killing ourselves in the name of corporate freedom,” Goldstein said.

Mexico and Berkeley have already implemented a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, and CrossFit Inc.’s recent **California Invasion** affiliate tour was designed to drum up support for a **California Senate bill** that would require health-warning labels on sugar-sweetened beverages.

Michael Long holds a doctorate of science and is assistant professor in the Department of Prevention and Community Health at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University. He’s spent more than seven years studying the potential effects of a nationwide soda tax.

Long and a team of researchers created a “**Sim City**”-style **model** of the United States using U.S. Census data. The model predicted the result of a one-cent-per-ounce tax on sugar-sweetened beverages over 10 years.

According to the model, implementing the tax nationally would cost \$51 million the first year. In the second year, the tax would reduce sugar-sweetened-beverage consumption by 20 percent and cut mean body-mass index (BMI) by 0.15 among youths and .08 among adults. The model predicted the tax would result in health-care savings of \$23.6 billion and generate \$12.5 billion in annual revenue from 2015 to 2025.

Long said he believes the evidence supports prioritizing an excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverages in public policy.

“It would reduce obesity, save populations and reach adults as well as children,” he said.

Health Over Profits

The evidence regarding the terrible influence of sugar-sweetened beverages on our health is unequivocal, but the products are hugely profitable for The Coca-Cola Co., PepsiCo, Dr Pepper Snapple Group and others. These companies and the American Beverage Association (ABA) that represents them would like nothing more than to maintain the status quo, and the ABA **actively opposes soda taxes** and similar legislative efforts to curb consumption.

The ABA and beverage companies have a vested interest in keeping the profits flowing, but those outside the industry very much want to use policy to make changes that will result in improved health.

We are at a crucial point in history, Long said: “The moment in time where risking doing nothing means seeing the epidemic continue.”

Lend your voice in support of warning labels on sugar-sweetened beverages in California: CrushBigSoda.com. ■

About the Author

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