

Ms. Beatrice Lorenzin
Minister of Health, Italy
Chair of G7 Health Ministers Meeting
November 2017, Milan, Italy

November 2, 2017

Dear Ms Lorenzin:

We write to you as Chair of the meeting of the G7 Ministers of Health in Milan, November 6/7th 2017, for the attention of the Health Ministers of the G7 countries.

We are calling for actionable policies and directives including, but not limited to, a long term and integrated approach to ensure safe and sustainable food systems, economic measures to reverse the growing dependency on highly processed and unhealthy foods and significant new investment in nutrition education.

The Burden of Preventable Chronic Disease

It is widely accepted that there is an urgent need to address the global inexorable increase in lifestyle related chronic diseases. Many of these conditions, blighting the lives of many millions of people throughout the world, are preventable through improved nutrition.

In recent years there have been numerous scientific reports calling for action to reverse the growing burden to individuals and society of non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancers, hypertension and diabetes, yet we fail to see widespread improvements in outcome, and a concerted and integrated rather than piecemeal approach to public health policy.

The World Health Organisation in 2005 called for investment in health promotion to stem the rise in premature deaths and avoid unnecessary disability due to chronic diseases (1). Financial institutions recognise the potentially catastrophic socio-economic impact of rising levels of obesity. Last month the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems produced a wide-ranging report and action plan which cited the “staggering” total health costs of modern industrial food systems and described how the root causes of ill health are often left unaddressed (2). A recent article in the New York Times revealed the extent to which multinational food companies are aggressively expanding further into developing nations with existing obesity problems, portraying “a war between two food systems, a traditional diet of real food once produced by the farmers around you, and the producers of ultra-processed food designed to be over-consumed and which in some cases are addictive” (3)

Modern Diets imperil our Environment

Incontrovertible evidence shows that our industrial food systems and heavily processed diet are directly linked not only to poor health, but also to the degeneration of the environment, climate change and diminished biodiversity. Studies estimate that adoption of more sustainable diets could reduce related greenhouse gas emissions by as much as 80% and reduce water usage by 50% as well as reducing all-cause mortality (4).

An Emerging Scientific Consensus

With striking similarity to the accord amongst scientists on matters related to climate change, there is now broad agreement on what constitutes a healthy and sustainable diet and lifestyle.

The True Health Initiative, a coalition of world renowned experts in the fields of medicine, science, nutrition and the media characterises the healthiest diets as those comprised of minimally processed, generally plant predominant foods in balanced combinations, for example the traditional diets of Mediterranean and certain Asian populations. (5)

The 2015 Oldways Common Ground Conference in Boston brought together leading scientists and commentators, publishing a landmark Consensus Statement on Healthy Eating which included a series of principles and recommendations. (6)

The Food Values Conference February 2017 hosted by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in the Vatican witnessed a further consensus and call for action, gathering speakers and guests from a broad range of backgrounds including the scientific community, media, politics, food production, the culinary arts and education to debate the value placed on our food in the context of increasing recognition of the importance of dietary traditions and food quality to ensure health and sustainability and reverse the catastrophic impact of our modern food environment. (7)

A Call for Action

There is a compelling need for the Ministers of Health of the G7 Countries to urgently address the challenges outlined above. Responsibility does not rest with Governments alone. Scientists, health professionals and those involved in education as well as food production and preparation all have a role to play to ensure that individuals can make the best choices. However, policy makers are in a unique position of influence and are empowered to take decisions which can have significant scope and powerful consequences. There is much that Governments can and should do, and it is incumbent upon those in privileged positions of representation to fulfil their obligations to secure the health and wellbeing of future generations.

We call upon the Ministers of Health of the G7 Countries to deliver;

1. **Policies which recognise the need for a long term and integrated approach to ensure safe and sustainable food systems** - acknowledging the evidence for the health and environmental benefits of local, traditional ways of production and preparation. There is an immediate need to begin this journey through Commissions specifically designed to consider independent evidence on issues of public health, agriculture and the environment. These bodies must be willing to hear sometimes uncomfortable truths from scientific witnesses calling for radical change in the way in which we value and understand food production and consumption.
2. **Robust and resolute economic measures to support the production and sale of more healthy food** - including financial incentivisation and taxation where necessary, which will encourage investment in viable alternatives to current production and marketing practices, making access to healthy foods more available and affordable.
3. **Significant investment in nutrition education** – although “food literacy” should not be confined to children, it should be the right of every child to be taught a much broader understanding of basic nutritional principles, techniques of preparing healthy food, the impact of diet on health, as well as providing access to the evidence of the environmental consequences of dietary choice. Access to appropriate education as part of the curriculum of schools and colleges is an immediate priority which needs to be addressed through government policies.

References;

1. Preventing Chronic Diseases – A Vital Investment, World Health Organisation 2005
2. Unravelling the Food-Health Nexus; addressing practices, political economy and power relations to build healthier food systems. IPES Food and Global Alliance for the Future of Food, October 2017
3. How Big Business Got Brazil Hooked on Junk Food. Andrew Jacobs and Matt Ritschel, New York Times, Sept 2017
4. Aleksandrowicz L, Green R, Joy EJM, Smith P, Haines A. The Impacts of Dietary Change on Greenhouse Gas Emissions, Land Use, Water Use, and Health: A Systematic Review. Wiley AS, ed. *PLoS ONE*. 2016;11(11): e0165797. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0165797.
5. True Health Initiative; Many experts. 6 Principles. 1 voice
6. Oldways Common Ground Consensus Statement on Healthy Eating; <https://oldwayspt.org/programs/oldways-common-ground/oldways-common-ground-consensus>
7. Food Values – the Renaissance of the Mediterranean Diet and its Significance for a 21st Century World – Proceedings of Conference, Vatican City, 2017
http://www.casinapioiv.va/content/accademia/en/events/2017/food_values.html

Yours Sincerely,

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Founding Director of Yale University's Yale-Griffin *Prevention Research Center*

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Attached Letter of Support

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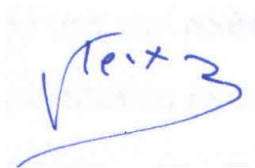
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RICHARD H . CARMONA, M. D., M.P.H., FACS

17th Surgeon General of the United States

October 23, 2017

Ms. Lorenzin
G7 Health Ministers Chair

Dear Ms. Lorenzin,

I write to strongly support and endorse my colleagues in the True Health Initiatives who are respectfully requesting that the G-7 Ministers address strategy and policy to ensure sustainable healthy food systems globally.

We are continually burdened by a mounting preventable chronic disease and economic burden that is significantly driven by the current food systems and our poor eating habits.

Sincerely,

Richard Carmona, M.D., M.P. fl., FACS

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Distinguished Professor
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