

Rhoda Grant MSP

Speech in the Scottish Parliament

Preventing Obesity

24 February 2010

Rhoda Grant : The rising rate of obesity is alarming and threatens to wipe out the health gains that have been made by many years of work aimed at reducing heart disease and smoking.

It is also a complex issue, especially when dealing with young people.

Young people need a balanced diet to develop properly, so extreme dieting can cause them health problems later in life.

We must also be aware of the stress that is placed on young people to conform to certain images.

That is a problem with girls, in particular, but it is an increasing problem with boys, too. For that reason, we need to be careful that, when tackling obesity in young people, we do not give the impression that super skinny is good, which leads to problems with eating disorders.

We cannot afford to ignore these life-threatening issues.

I am concerned that there is a general lack of knowledge in Scotland about nutrition, which means that people cannot make informed choices.

People are also unsure about how to cook certain food

Our society depends heavily on convenience food, which tends to be less nutritious and more expensive.

To change that, we need to return to teaching cooking and nutrition in school, to ensure that all young people are equipped with the knowledge that they need to make healthy choices.

The loss of healthy living centres impacts on the issue, as we have a generation of people who are now parents who lack knowledge of nutrition.

It should be no surprise that their children are growing up increasingly obese.

The parents do not know about a balanced diet and are unable to provide it, far less pass on that knowledge to their children.

As a society, we are less active.

Children no longer play outside because of a fear of danger.

We need to look at the availability of opportunities to exercise that allow parents to feel that their children are safe while taking part in activities.

Although children are not at greater danger than they have been in past generations, parents perceive that they are. We must, therefore, ensure that there are safe activities in which young people can get involved that acknowledge those real concerns.

Many organised activities come with a price tag, which disadvantages families on lower incomes.

Organised activities tend to be less common in deprived areas because of a lack of demand, which is due to the costs involved.

In our society, there is a lack of tolerance of the noise that children make when they play. "No ball games" signs spring up in residential areas, but the same estates have no play areas—or, if they do, they are deemed unsafe.

It is little wonder that the problem is increasing.

In its briefing, the Scottish Sports Association tells us that, since 1970, our calorific intake has fallen by 750 calories a day, yet the incidence of obesity rises.

Much of that increase is due to the lack of activity in our lives.

Cathy Jamieson spoke about safe streets, and the briefing from Living Streets suggests a number of ways in which our streets could be changed to make them safer and to provide people with the security that they need to walk rather than take the car.

Having lower speed limits in residential areas is one such idea.

The previous Government carried out a lot of work creating safer routes to school, and that work must be built on if we are to get people out and about.

There is an issue around encouraging young people to get involved in activities—and it is notoriously difficult to get young girls involved.

I visited Atlantis Leisure in Oban, which has been innovative when it comes to involving young people in sporting activities.

It has a climbing wall and provides dance classes that are very popular with young women.

In order to engage young women, physical activities need to be provided in a format that they are happy with, and dance is a very good example.

In addition, the facilities in sports centres should be geared to their needs.

Communal showers and changing rooms can be off-putting to teenage girls, who are at an age when they are very self-conscious.

There is a tremendous pressure on them to look good.

Getting their hair wet means that they need hairdryers, straighteners and so on.

It is pointless saying that they should not be concerned about such things—they are, and they will get involved only if such facilities are available.

Several members have highlighted the fact that the poor tend to suffer more from obesity.

Parents on low incomes have the challenge of feeding their families on a budget.

We all know that unhealthy food is cheaper.

If we compare the cost of sausage roll and chips with that of chicken and vegetables, it is not hard to see why those choices are made.

If fruit and vegetables were more affordable, parents would buy them for their families.

There must be a way of making them available more cheaply to low-income families.

Projects such as Good for Ewe in Wester Ross are good examples of how a community can come

together, with people helping one another to access fresh vegetables.

The project allows people to rent polytunnel space and to work with others in planting and growing their own food. In other areas—more affluent areas, it seems, rather than areas where there is more need—there is a rise in the number of people who are looking for allotments so that they can grow their own vegetables.

Projects like Good for Ewe should be rolled out into more urban communities.

Obesity increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart attack, colon cancer and angina.

The cost to the health service is huge: there are the costs of the treatment of the associated diseases; and there is the increase in the costs of drug treatment for the obesity itself.

The personal cost is immeasurable.

There is no simple answer to the problem.

A range of issues need to be addressed in order to encourage people to eat more healthily and take more exercise, and I have advanced only a few.