Chief Medical Officer for Wales publishes annual report

Overall health in Wales is improving, but action is needed to address rising obesity levels, continued high rates of smoking and a growing culture of binge drinking.

That's the conclusion of the first report from the Welsh Assembly Government's principal medical adviser, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for Wales Dr Tony Jewell.

Dr Jewell's report finds that overall health in Wales is getting better, with infant mortality rates improving, people living longer and – although remaining the biggest killer – deaths from circulatory disease reducing.

However, the CMO says issues such as obesity, smoking, alcohol abuse and widening health inequalities pose risks that need to be tackled.

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Key findings and recommendations in the report include:

- fighting obesity – with Welsh children having some of the highest body mass index results in the world, action is needed to address the factors which contribute to Wales’s obesogenic society;
- tackling binge drinking – with Welsh children drinking more alcohol at an earlier age, considering how the new powers in Wales can be used to counter the growing culture of alcohol abuse;
- continuing action on smoking – including campaigning for smoke-free homes for children and setting an interim target for a 17 per cent smoking prevalence level, down from the current 25 per cent; and,
- addressing health inequalities – structural funding, economic regeneration, housing, education and targeted investment should all contribute to building a nation which is fairer socially and economically.

Dr Jewell said:

While overall population indicators may show health is improving, these conceal wide variations within the population.

I am particularly concerned about the health of children in Wales, notably the rising epidemic of obesity, high smoking rates, and the growing culture of binge drinking. Children in Wales drink more alcohol at an earlier age, exercise less and have body mass index results higher than the majority of countries in the Western world.

A recent World Health Organisation survey found Wales has one of the highest level of overweight and obese youth among all the countries it studied. In the United States, there are fears that today’s children may not outlive their parents if the trend obesity is not reversed. We need to build on the good work we are already doing to encourage healthy eating choices and physical activity, such as the implementation
plan on food and fitness, to ensure that where America leads, Wales does not follow

On smoking, current data shows that while the number of adult smokers is falling, there are still 6,000 premature deaths each year, while children are taking up the habit around the age of 12. The smoking ban is a major step forward, but now we have to try and prevent young people starting to smoke and build the campaign for smoke-free homes – especially where there are children exposed to second-hand smoke. Figures published earlier this week show that more mothers in Wales (37 per cent) smoked during their pregnancy than in any other UK country.

The aim is ultimately a smoke-free Wales, but a realistic intermediate goal must be aiming to reach the 17 per cent prevalence level which has already been achieved in Sweden and California. Currently, 25 per cent of adults are smokers.

Reducing alcohol consumption is also a priority. There is growing evidence that young people in Wales are starting to drink at an early age and regularly binge drink with consequent risk of injury, road traffic crashes, unsafe sex and anti-social behaviour.

Along with the other UK CMOs, I have written to the Treasury to express concern about the relatively cheap price of alcohol and the need to consider tax policies as part of a programme of action. In Wales with our new powers we can consider how using existing legislation or developing new powers will contribute to managing the problem. We need to develop a programme to raise self esteem in young people and reduce the culture of binge drinking and other substance misuse extending into adulthood.

We must tackle wider health inequalities and improve the health outcomes of those disadvantaged communities. For example, the communities of the South Wales Valleys have some of the worst health outcomes in Wales. These are the communities where lifestyle choices will cause future problems with higher than average rates of smoking, drinking and obesity.

There has already been a lot of work done to tackle this issue. We now need to ensure that more deprived communities have access to successful health improvement programmes, such as smoking cessation services. People also have to take more responsibility for their own health.

Other recommendations in the CMOs report include:

- greater use of the primary and community care sectors to manage the increasing number of people suffering from chronic long term conditions and reduce their hospital admissions – Wales has a higher proportion of long term illness (23 per cent than England (18 per cent); Scotland and Northern Ireland (20 per cent);
- implement measures to reduce sexually transmitted infections – the number of cases of both chlamydia and gonorrhoea have been rising since 2000, and many people may not be aware they are carrying infections; and,
- continuing to control and drive down Healthcare Associated Infections (HCALs) – although the HCAI rate for Wales is lower than the UK average, more work needs to be done to reduce rates further.

Dr Jewell concluded:
Although the overall health situation is favourable, with continuing improvements in infant mortality and increasing life expectancy, health inequalities are still with us. Welsh in Wales continue to suffer from a high burden of long term illness, which, while partly due to our industrial past, risks becoming a cycle of deprivation.

We need to harness the energy, expertise and commitment of the Welsh Assembly Government, the NHS, local government, the voluntary and business sectors and the population themselves to deliver equity of health outcomes across Wales. Together we can tackle health inequalities and make continued progress towards achieving a world class health service for Wales.

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