Sugar – Not so ‘toxic’

Response by the Dietitians Association of Australia to an opinion piece in the 2 February issue of the journal Nature titled ‘The toxic truth about sugar’.

Sugar has been sensationalized as ‘toxic’ in an opinion piece in the February 2012 issue of the journal Nature. But the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) believes it is simplistic and unhelpful to blame sugar alone for rising rates of obesity and other related health problems across the world.

Weight gain is caused by eating more energy (or kilojoules) than is used up in physical activity. So to achieve and maintain a healthy weight, the focus needs to be on eating fewer kilojoules and moving more.

When it comes to sugar, DAA supports the recommendations of the Australian Dietary Guidelines which are:• To eat only moderate amounts of sugars, and• To limit those foods that are high in added sugar and low in nutrition – such as carbonated soft drinks, confectionery, cakes and biscuits.

A healthy diet involves eating a wide variety of nutritious foods – while occasionally still being able to enjoy small amounts of foods containing added sugar. Labelling sugar as ‘toxic’ and ‘addictive’ and placing it in the same boat as alcohol is incorrect and misleading.

Sadly, when it comes to reporting on nutrition DAA has heard many sensationalist stories before. Not unlike fad diets, these reports often appear cyclically like the proverbial ‘bad penny’. Rather than focussing on the results of a single study or opinion piece, DAA bases its recommendations on the best science available at the time.

Sugar and poor health While the opinion piece in Nature blames sugar as the cause of the worldwide obesity epidemic and related health problems, large long-term studies in this area (and in humans) are currently lacking. DAA would like to see further research conducted on the effect of sugar intake (in amounts generally consumed by people, rather than many times above this) on body weight and health.

Sugar intake in Australia Sugar intake has decreased in Australia over the past 40 years – but as a nation, we continue to put on weight. Australian research has found sugar consumption has dropped 23 per cent in this country since 1980, but overweight and obesity have doubled in that time and diabetes has at least tripled. The Nature piece mentions the controversy over high-fructose corn syrups in the USA. But unlike in America, high-fructose corn syrups are not widely used in our food supply.

Australian food companies have been working to improve the nutrition quality of their products, including reducing the amount of sugar added to foods. But there is more work to be done – and DAA would like to see more food companies working
with Accredited Practising Dietitians over time to develop healthier products.

**Tackling obesity** A comprehensive, coordinated and evidence-based approach is needed to tackle obesity, and therefore the health-related side effects of overweight and obesity. DAA believes this includes funding the dietary management of obesity through Medicare, better regulating food marketing, improving the Australian food supply, and a host of other actions, as outlined in the Association’s Obesity Strategy.

**Taxing foods containing added sugar** The opinion piece in Nature proposes taxing foods that contain added sugar. As obesity is a complex problem, DAA believes the solution is much broader than just taxing certain foods and drinks.

If a tax on all foods with added sugar were to be introduced in Australia, a real risk is that people will continue to spend money on these, meaning they would have less to spend on healthy foods. This would have the greatest impact on people on lower incomes, where the burden of disease is often greatest. So DAA believes subsidising healthy foods, such as fruit and vegetables, to be a more effective, long-term approach.