

Current trends in nutrition: the situation in Switzerland

Topic:
State and freedom

5th Swiss Nutrition Report. Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin presented the 5th Swiss Nutrition Report in Berne in early December. The report shows that many important conditions required for everyone in Switzerland to enjoy a healthy and balanced diet are fulfilled. But the more than 70 studies that make up the report also show that too little use is made of these opportunities. Increased prevention in the nutrition field could greatly improve public health, enhance quality of life and lower health-related costs.



Young people in Langenthal prepare a tasty muesli dish from rapper/world champion cook Ivo Adam. As a part of the nationwide nutritional campaign «Swiss Balance», the «Freestyle Tour» project introduced schoolchildren throughout Switzerland to trendy sports and healthy diet.

The Swiss Nutrition Reports are commissioned by the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (SFOPH) and produced every seven years. Like its predecessors, the latest edition examines different aspects of nutrition. It confirms once again that food in Switzerland is safe to eat. The real health risks are not due to contamination of food by undesirable substances but to poor diet. According to the WHO, nutritional diseases are the number-one health risk today. 37% of Swiss are overweight or even obese, and the trend is rising steadily, also among children and young people.

Effective solutions

The 5th Swiss Nutrition Report does not confine itself to identifying nutritional problems, but also presents possible solutions. And the authors have looked beyond Switzerland's borders for them. A report from Finland on the «North Karelia Project» shows that effective measures can have a favourable effect on a nation's dietary habits. Having joined forces with the food industry, agricultural sector, media, schools and other partners, the Finnish health authorities have, in 30 years, succeeded in drastically reducing the incidence of nutritional diseases in the population. For instance, deaths due to cardiovascular disease in men aged 35 to 64 fell by 64% in Finland in 25 years.

These findings should lend a fresh impetus to prevention projects in Switzerland, which also runs nationwide programmes that have enjoyed some successes in the last few years, for instance «Swiss Balance», «5 a day» or «action d». The 5th Swiss Nutrition Report now provides a basis for further developing a Swiss policy on nutrition along the lines of the WHO's approach. The SFOPH is drawing up a national strategy to implement the corresponding WHO

resolution. Since the publication of the 4th Swiss Nutrition Report in 1998, the nutritional gap has widened. Besides growing numbers of overweight individuals, a new problem, previously somewhat overlooked, is emerging in the area of malnutrition, particularly in hospitals. A study conducted in 50 large hospitals shows that approximately 20% to 40% of all hospitalized patients demonstrate signs of being poorly nourished.

Top athletes and vegetarians

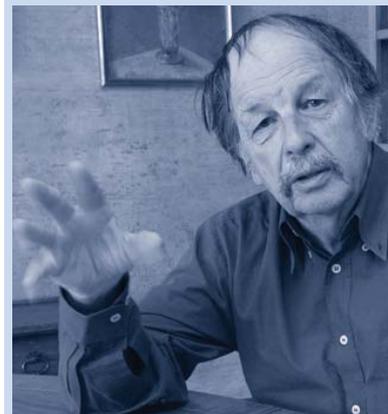
Besides these key topics, the report also provides information that is of interest to the general public. For instance, the nutrient intake of top athletes was examined. Conclusion: Low carbohydrate intake is a major shortcoming in their diet, being even lower on average than the minimum level required for amateur sportsmen and sportswomen. The new findings on vegetarianism are also interesting. Vegetarians are often healthier than non-vegetarians. They eat more fruit, vegetables, nuts and whole-grain products and also tend to have a more health-conscious lifestyle.

The scientific edition of the nutrition report (available in book form and on CD-ROM) comprises 70 contributions on 1,070 pages. A popular version (with a CD-ROM of the main report enclosed) has also been produced to make the most important findings accessible to a wider public. It focuses on children and young people and includes a leaflet with tips for everyday nutrition.

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Interview



Social ethics expert Hans Ruh wants to see more use made of the causality principle: if it were, petrol would cost six times as much as it does so as to cover its health-related and environmental costs, a «fat tax» would be levied on unhealthy food, and anyone who needlessly put his health at risk (by smoking or overeating, for instance) pays higher health-insurance premiums as a punishment. He calls on the health authorities to stand up for the interests of people whose health is put at risk by others, to do more lobbying and to massively expand prevention activities.

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Enough of passive smoking

Resistance to involuntarily breathing in other people's smoke is growing. While a nationwide survey shows that the situation has improved somewhat at the workplace and in the home, there's been virtually no change at all in restaurants, cafés and bars, with 56% of interviewees (and 68% of non-smokers) claiming to be seriously bothered by smoke.

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«We need to turn our backs on our stultify

Freedom or the state. Health and self-fulfilment are among man's most prized goals. Where and by what means should the state intervene to help ethics expert Hans Ruh about how our society has arrived at its present relationship between individual freedom and state regulation and what challenges

spectra: What is the historical background to the distinction between individual freedom and state regulation?

Hans Ruh: In its original sense, freedom was the right of individuals to take responsibility for their own lives. The notion of freedom is a product of the Enlightenment. It didn't, however, just mean that people could do whatever they liked. According to Kant, autonomy means taking complete responsibility for obeying a law which you've set for yourself but which may also be applied to others. We've made something quite different out of this idea. We're now seeing a mega-trend towards fulfilment of the ego, of this autonomy. It's no coincidence that man's favourite toy is the motor car. The path from autonomy to the car parallels the decline of the European Enlightenment.

We've reduced the idea of freedom to something pragmatic, banal and economic. Problems arise when we try to focus on two issues: responsibility and the social conditions governing freedom. I'm not free if I'm starving. It's not a question of simply maximizing the freedom of the stronger. The notion of freedom sets us apart from other cultures and I wouldn't want to lose it. But we are still faced with the key question: How do we integrate freedom and responsibility?

How has the notion of freedom changed over time?

Our country is very much influenced by our European neighbours, and the concept of solidarity plays a major role. The historical development of freedom has been a roller-coaster ride. In the early 19th century, freedom triumphed in the form of Manchester Liberalism – but then along came the ideas of Marx and the social policies they generated. In Germany their protagonist was Bismarck,

while in Switzerland we had the Factory Laws, for instance in the Glarus textile industry. Thus the late 19th century saw a counter-movement against excessive freedom, particularly economic freedom exercised at the cost of society's weaker groups. The idea of the welfare state was a correction, geared to solidarity, of the idea of freedom. An attempt was made to create a balance between the two. In the early 20th century, freedom was once again at a premium. The economic crisis caused people to turn to Communism and then National Socialism in their search for answers. Then the concept of the «social market economy» was developed, in the middle of the Second World War. This was a further attempt to create a balance between freedom and solidarity. In Switzerland and Western Europe, this model functioned to a greater or lesser extent for fifty years.

Today we're in free fall again: globalization, neoliberalism and deregulation are the order of the day. Deregulation means freeing from government control. Now we have to create a balance again between freedom and solidarity, but under the conditions of globalization. This is an extraordinarily difficult thing to do because the institutions that used to achieve it are weak. The state can't take over this task and so a new model has to be found – like the social policies of the 19th century and the social market economy of the 20th. Civil society has to re-discover solidarity, and the economy itself has to ensure that ethics and solidarity are implemented, because the state can no longer perform this role.

The economy is shaped by extremes. The strong are getting rich fast and the weak are falling even further behind...

Growing incomes at the top, falling incomes at the bottom – an unacceptable situation. The state has no opportunity to intervene here because it competes internationally. If it imposes excessively high minimum wages, businesses move away, and if it introduces higher taxes, it's taxpayers who move away. The state can regulate only to a limited extent. A new approach is needed: all those who want a world in which social justice, solidarity, freedom from terror and the strength to survive prevail will have to create new models. An enormous challenge, but now would be the right moment for Europe to come up with a model for the future. It's also an enormous opportunity that we shouldn't ignore.

Our particular interest is in health. How should the state proceed in this area? Can it do more than, for instance, conduct the LOVE LIFE STOP AIDS campaign, which promotes the use of condoms as the best protection against AIDS?

Switzerland's health authorities are exemplary in the field of AIDS prevention. The only option in this area is prevention. Nor can the principle of causality be applied here, because it would be contrary to the dignity of man and protection of the weak. There's more scope for intervention in the field of anti-HIV drugs – the state can ensure that these are available to all people with HIV/AIDS.

How should the state deal with behaviour that jeopardizes health? How can it intervene in a regulatory sense?

This is where the principle of causality can be brought to bear. The state would intervene wherever a specific type of behaviour becomes a burden on society in the form of health-related or social welfare costs. Products



that are associated with high costs for society would be subject to extremely high taxes. A complete re-think is needed in this area. We tax labour. Why, for goodness' sake? Labour is something positive, we should actually be promoting it. We ought to be taxing the things that are harmful to society. By taxing them, we could help improve general wellbeing while at the same time controlling behaviour through state intervention. In the context of illegal drugs, for instance, we could impose much greater sanctions on drug dealers –

Forum

State regulation or individual freedom?

At many levels of our society citizens are faced with complex and often virtually impenetrable sets of rules and regulations. Traffic regulations are a case in point, but there are also the ban on «disposing» of domestic waste in the litter baskets at tram or bus stops, the «house rules» that regulate every last detail of how residents in blocks of flats may live, and all the different things we have to do if we are to lead a «healthy life» (proper diet, physical exercise, preventive medical check-ups, etc.). And violent films have triggered calls for the establishment of an ethics committee or some other



state body to censure unacceptable scenes. All these rules and regulations involve a threat of fines or other sanctions if they are infringed. Faced with all the dos and don'ts that govern modern life, many citizens feel so regulated and constrained that, far from keeping to the rules, they are provoked into deliberately breaking them. Young and old alike make a game out of getting round or breaking rules set by the state. In department stores, for instance, vast amounts of goods are stolen not because they are needed but because of the satisfaction of breaking rules. By improperly disposing of waste, many people are expressing how fed up they are with all the regulations they have to observe in this area. People also break rules because they need to protest against what is felt to be an unacceptable restriction of individual freedom.

Critics of the plethora of state rules and regulations often argue that the citizen's individual freedom needs to be protected, and they appeal to people's sense of personal responsibility. This is certainly an argument that de-

serves to be taken seriously: rules can be kept only if people see a need for them and are prepared to respect them. In the final analysis, checks or threats of punishment do not ensure acceptance of effective rules and regulations governing behaviour.

The path to be trodden between too much and too little state regulation is a narrow one. As stated above, rules are broken if there are too many of them. With too little state regulation, on the other hand, there is a risk that the basic rules of coexistence will not be respected and that individuals or the state as a whole will be harmed. I think it is questionable – and even dangerous – to assume that citizens can develop a sufficiently strong sense of personal responsibility to ensure that everyone's interests are protected. Besides, such an assumption would reflect a tendency on the part of the state to shift the burden of responsibility from its own shoulders to those of the citizens. Rules – if they are reasonable! – not only place limits on what the individual is free to do, they are also helpful as coordinates and reference points for the

many people who have difficulty finding their way in the complexity of present-day society.

By setting limits, the state fulfils a function normally exercised by parents. Except that many children grow up today without being taught such standards or values by their parents, which means that even as adults they are dependent on rules and regulations prescribed elsewhere. In the end, the state can, and should, set rules that make it clear what values are to be upheld in the community.

What, then, is the answer to the dilemma of too much or too little state regulation? In my view, it is to include an ethical dimension in the public debate and strengthen empathy and understanding for the significance to others of respecting the rules of coexistence. In this way, regulations set by the state can act as valuable reference points and stimulate discussion.

Prof. Udo Rauchfleisch

ying and fattening machines.»

achieve these goals and where can this be left to the individual's sense of personal responsibility? We spoke to social es the future is likely to bring.



Hans Ruh

today they get off far too lightly. It's drug trafficking we should be punishing, not consumption. Each problem requires its own strategy. In the case of cannabis, for instance, we could decriminalize consumption while at the same time massively increasing the provision of information on it, particularly in schools. Cannabis may possibly have serious consequences for health, perhaps even causing mental illness. It doesn't make sense to prosecute users, but prevention must constantly draw attention to the health risks.

A further major threat to health is an excessively high-fat diet, aggravated by lack of exercise. Here taxes could be used to control behaviour, for instance selling high-fat sausages for 17 francs each. I would welcome the introduction of a «fat tax». Conversely, members of sports clubs would be rewarded by paying lower health-insurance premiums. Sports clubs would be subsidized. We'd be killing two birds with one stone: creating a good model for voluntary work in sports clubs and ensuring better health for the active members through exercise and sport. Prevention has to be strengthened across the board and new, creative ideas are needed.

Offering incentives to engage in sport – that's the carrot. But what about the stick? Are we to punish the refuseniks and all those who consciously harm their own health?

To some extent, yes. We'd have to set a firm threshold for sanctions at the lower end so that they don't affect the socially disadvantaged. But your average citizen of normal intelligence and normal income could certainly be expected to pay part of any health-related costs they cause.

In concrete terms, this could mean higher health-insurance premiums for smokers?

Yes, that would be ethically justifiable. Smoking harms other people as well as the smoker, and there's no excuse for that.

Should people who are overweight also be «punished» for their unhealthy behaviour?

It's easier in the case of smoking because it's easier to prove. With obesity it's not that simple. I prefer the idea of levying a fat tax and promoting physical activity. Your average citizen who eats too much also has to pay for it some time or other. Electronic equipment should also probably be subject to massive taxes because they cause obesity and brainlessness.

Should we also tax cars?

If we include health-related and environmental costs, petrol would cost about 10 francs a litre. That would be the solution.

If we were simply to take the rate of inflation since the 1960s into account, petrol would cost between five and six francs a litre. That would also have an effect on big gas guzzlers.

But we're seeing quite the opposite trend. Just a short time ago, Parliament refused to raise the tax on gas guzzlers.

There can be only two possible explanations for this: either a sacrifice of reason or an absence of reason. A mixture of the two is fatal. They've either abandoned their capacity to reason or they didn't possess any in the first place. In the present situation, I consider it beneath the dignity of any normal thinker not to take the subject of particulate matter seriously. It's true that we have fine hairs in our noses and ears that filter particles from the air. But we human beings don't possess an inbuilt filter for particulate matter – these dangerous substances pass directly into our lungs. They're not going to do me much harm because I'm 72, but my grandchildren are a different matter...

Legal drugs are also an important economic factor. What do you think of the current regulatory situation?

There's no reason to rejoice because we earn money from such things. It's

wrong to indirectly promote the consumption of alcohol, even if it generates more money for the state retirement pension. The state must not apply double standards in this area.

How do you feel about the fact that tobacco production is subsidized to the same extent as prevention?

We simply have to get away from such subsidies. Sooner or later we have to find a satisfactory solution for everyone concerned. In contrast to moderate consumption of wine, smoking represents a direct risk to the smoker and his or her environment. It is unacceptable that others should be forced into passive smoking.

What part should the health authorities play?

The health authorities should stand up for the interests of those whose health is put at risk by others – whether as a result of direct harm or because society has to pay through the nose for people who have behaved stupidly.

What counts is a consistent policy. It can be achieved only by constantly seeking to win over the public, by challenging the politicians at the intellectual level and by engaging in an enormous amount of lobbying.

Is the greatest good really health – or is it, as Bruno Frick, President of the Swiss Cantonal Health Directors' Conference, has put it – happiness?

Happiness has always been an issue in ethics – Aristotle referred to it as «wellbeing». The Constitution of the United States even specifies happiness as a right. But besides the pursuit of our own happiness, we have to consider the question of how we treat other people. It's OK to pursue happiness, but we have to see where its boundaries lie.

We're in a terribly privileged situation – and we make far too little of it. We need a new approach to our bodies, a new kind of physicality, that will encompass both health and happiness. We need to get out of all our machines and turn our backs on our stultifying and fattening electronics. I possess a body and I exercise it. That does me good. It does my brain good, too, and so I can think, and be happy.

Talking to spectra was:

Prof. Hans Ruh (born in 1933), professor emeritus and director of the University of Zurich's Institute of Social Ethics. Ruh is an acknowledged expert on business, corporate, occupational and environmental ethics and the author of many articles and books on the subject.

At the beginning of his career in ethics, he focused on questions relating to peace and poverty. Later, he became involved in environmental issues. He has devoted the last few years to ethical questions arising from economic liberalization and unemployment. During this time, he has exposed contradictions and shown that quality of life and solidarity have priority over economic productivity.

Hans Ruh is Chairman of the Board of Directors of BlueValue AG, Zurich, a company that performs ethical analyses of securities and countries, develops new, ethically correct financial products and advises businesses on ethical questions.

At first hand



There is no doubt that individual freedom – also in the sense of «live and let live» – is highly prized in our society. Yet nobody would claim that state regulations in areas such as road safety are superfluous. With the growing complexity of traffic as pedestrians and various vehicles compete for space, mobility has to be regulated in order to ensure the safety of all concerned. Building regulations are similarly uncontroversial: though they may restrict the architect's imaginative scope, they guarantee safety.

But in other areas – health, for instance – restrictions are much more contentious. The perceived tendency of the state to know better than its citizens what is good for them or to dictate what the «right» way is for them to live their lives is fiercely criticized in some quarters. But aren't many health-related risk factors still subject to individual free will? High-risk sports, for instance, or diet, alcohol and tobacco consumption or sexual behaviour are areas in which everyone decides for himself what he wants to do. And yet, though such risks affect only the individuals concerned and to engage in them is, at best, unwise, surely the state has a duty to inform and educate the public accordingly and thereby ensure that «wise decisions» are taken. Having being made aware of the health risks involved, the citizens of a well informed society are better able to take preventive action. The situation is quite different when high-risk behaviour also affects other individuals. Then it is no longer a question of wisdom but of morality. And when the appeal to personal responsibility is no longer enough to keep other people safe from harm, state regulation is needed, for instance as protection against passive smoking. Contention still surrounds the question whether a high-risk lifestyle harming only the individual concerned but requiring a community-based remedy, for instance through the state-subsidised health insurance system, does not put too much of a strain on the principle of solidarity – and thus also needs to be regulated.

Conclusion: In matters of health, what counts is the perception of individuals as citizens who are prepared to take on personal responsibility. When provided with the necessary information and guidelines, they are able to make «wise» decisions. Regulation is applied only as needed – but not more.

Thomas Zeltner
Director
Swiss Federal Office of Public Health

Publications



What have we learned?

Prevention activities in youth work

The new publication in the «What Have We Learned?» series produced by the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health provides an overview of twelve years of commitment to drug prevention and health promotion in youth work. It gives an insight into various prevention programmes being implemented in the non-organized leisure and youth-association areas, discusses opportunities for web-based prevention activities and makes the wide spectrum of results obtained from productive co-operation of this type available in concentrated form to all interested parties. It also introduces prevention programmes and presents findings from evaluation studies and practical experience.

76 pages, A4 format.

Orders: www.bag-admin.ch
Topics, Substance Abuse

Growing demand for smoke-free environment

Survey on passive smoking. Fewer people were exposed to passive smoking at work or at home in 2004 than in the 2001–2002 period. Exposure to smoke in pubs and restaurants has not diminished: patrons regard it more and more as an annoyance and the demand for a change in the law is becoming increasingly loud.

The situation has improved, particularly in the workplace and at home. But a quarter of non-smokers are still involuntarily exposed to passive smoking for at least an hour a day. Three out of ten people work for companies that permit smoking at the workplace.

Since protection against passive smoking is one of the cornerstones of tobacco prevention and control, the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (SFOPH) commissioned the University of Zurich to conduct a survey, headed by Professor R. Hornung, of passive smoking among 2,500 subjects aged from 14 to 65. The report paints a representative picture of exposure to passive smoking and the annoyance it causes.

Little improvement in pubs and restaurants

One quarter of non-smokers and more than two out of five smokers interviewed were exposed to other people's tobacco smoke for at least an hour a day in 2004. Compared with the last survey, for the 2001–2002 period, overall exposure to passive smoking – taking all settings into account – has shown a slight decline. In restaurants, cafés, bars and entertainment venues, however, there has been virtually no improvement. A good four out of five interviewees had been exposed to tobacco smoke. Passive smoking at the workplace has, however, declined. The proportion of interviewees exposed to tobacco smoke at work fell from 54% to 47%.

Other people's tobacco smoke was most often felt to be annoying in restaurants, cafés and bars. 56% (2001–2002: 49%) of patrons and as many as 68% of non-smokers (2001–2002: 61%) felt it to be a serious annoyance. At entertainment venues and the workplace, the proportion of exposed persons who felt annoyed by tobacco smoke showed a smaller rise.

Regulations at the workplace

In 2004, two thirds of employees were working for a company that had either imposed a general ban on smoking or had set up defined smok-



A general ban on smoking in all trains and in enclosed spaces at railway stations has been in force in Switzerland since 11 December.

ing areas. Only 40% of employees interviewed were aware of the existence of legal provisions obliging employers to protect staff against passive smoking at the workplace (see the guidelines issued by seco, the Swiss Secretariat for Economic Affairs).

Avoiding smoky pubs & restaurants

About a quarter of interviewees said they avoided pubs and restaurants in which smoking was permitted. A majority of 61% (2001–2002: 55%) considered that legal provisions requiring restaurants to provide non-smoking areas were needed.

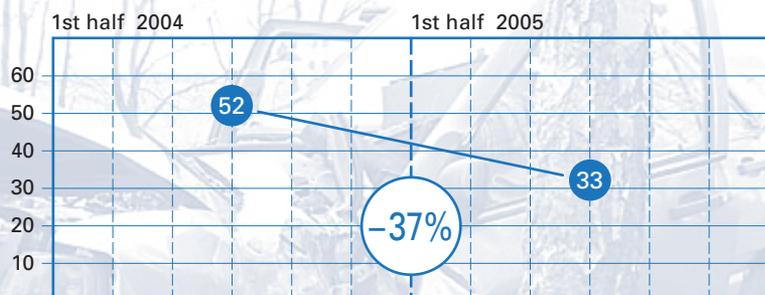
Summary of the study report on passive smoking: www.bag.admin.ch, Topics, Prevention, Tobacco, Facts & Figures
Guidelines issued by seco (Swiss Secretariat for Economic Affairs) on protection against passive smoking: www.at-schweiz.ch/rauchfreie_arbeitsplaetze/pdf/wegleitung_seco_de.pdf

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Ticino shows the way

On 12 October 2005, the Ticino Parliament voted to introduce a general ban on smoking in restaurants, bars and discos. Maybe the contribution of GastroTicino and neighbouring Italy's positive experience with its ban on smoking in public places contributed to the surprisingly clear 46 to 17 majority (with 13 abstentions) in favour of the motion. Ticino's landlords now have one year in which to bring their premises into line with the new law. After that, smoking will be allowed only in pubs & restaurants that provide well ventilated and completely separate rooms for smokers. In the Canton of Berne, a similar move to ban smoking in restaurants was turned down in late June 2005 only after the president of the cantonal parliament had cast his deciding vote against the motion. A general ban on smoking in all trains and in enclosed spaces at railway stations has been in force in Switzerland since 11 December.

Alcohol-related fatal traffic accidents



Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office

Measures that came into effect in January 2005, such as the lowering of the legal blood alcohol limit and the introduction of random breathalyser tests, are having an impact on the way drivers of motor vehicles behave: The number of serious road traffic accidents has dropped steeply (down 12%), particularly those presumed to involve alcohol (down 26%). Besides the broad public discussion and the information campaigns in the media, driving behaviour was probably also influenced by the increased frequency of police checks. It remains to be seen how effective these measures will be in the long term.

Credits

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