



Open letter: calorie labelling on restaurant menus will be both ineffective and psychologically damaging

[Home](#) » [News](#) » Open letter: calorie labelling on restaurant menus will be both ineffective and psychologically damaging

Following the announcement of the Government's new obesity strategy, including proposals to add calorie labelling to restaurant menus, author and campaigner Hope Virgo has written an open letter to Matt Hancock (Secretary of State for Health and Social Care) and Duncan Selbie (Chief Executive, Public Health England).



[Support our COVID-19 appeal](#)

In it, the undersigned highlight that such measures may be both ineffective in addressing obesity, and highly damaging to people experiencing or at risk of developing an eating disorder.

Dear Duncan Selbie and Matt Hancock MP,

RE: Remove calorie labels from restaurant menus

We are writing to you about the recently launched plan to tackle obesity. While we welcome the intention behind the strategy and support its desired outcomes, we are disappointed by the emphasis that the strategy places on numbers, weight and calorie counting - rather than on education and empowerment.

With an estimated **1.25 million** Brits suffering from eating disorders, what is proposed as a “common-sense approach” – focusing on weight and calorie counting – is incredibly destructive. Indeed, this approach stands in stark contradiction to the approach favoured by clinicians who **seek to avoid a scrupulous and psychologically damaging focus on weight, calorie counting, and BMI.**

Effective empowerment means equipping people with information to make better informed choices. While it is true that providing calorific information *may* be useful for *some*, it is important to realise that for those suffering from eating disorders, this sets entirely the wrong precedent. Allowing customers to choose to ask for a special menu with calorific information *should they wish to have this information* – as so many restaurants do already for those with food allergies – is far preferable as it allows consumers to opt in while also avoiding negative outcomes for those with eating disorders. Further to this, evidence has shown that 1 in 4 people who restrict their food intake go on to develop an eating disorder.

Regrettably, this strategy risks becoming a “one size fits none” model which does more harm than good. The evidence is clear: 93 percent of diets fail. Add to that the fact that for those with eating disorders, calorie counting simply creates a cycle of guilt and self-hatred. **Calorie counting in and of itself does not lead to healthy outcomes** and so instead of becoming fixated on a number we need to focus on wider health messages.

Help us support those at the frontline of this mental health crisis

Donate

Fundraise

Related



Government obesity strategy misses key elements in supporting healthy weight management for all, says Centre for Mental Health

Focusing on food and physical activity without addressing the reasons people struggle with them risks making the inequalities we already see worse still

It is also important to emphasise that we live in a society where disordered eating is normalised. This is extremely unhealthy and adding calories to menus will only make this worse. We will have children restricting their food intake and feeling concerned about calorific consumption, which could lead to an increase in eating disorders – **an illness with the highest mortality rate and one that costs the UK over £15 billion a year.**

The other area of concern is that obesity is defined on the basis of a person's BMI. Whilst we know that we are in an obesity crisis, what we need to be aware that by fat shaming we are causing yet more harm. Evidence shows that the BMI measurement is not an accurate indicator for health, but in fact it is racist, sexist and does not take in to account a person's health. We must learn from movements such as Health at Every Size (HAES), which has shown that health can be achieved regardless of weight. But by focusing on weight alone we are ignoring a person's genetics, upbringing, social inequalities, job, and whether the individual has a fear of attending the doctor because of weight stigma. If we address this, then we will be able to address obesity in the long-term and not just find quick wins which will be detrimental to others.

Mindful of this, we are today calling for the Government and Public Health England to:

1. Review the evidence around calorie counting and dieting;
2. Invest in educational programs so that individuals feel empowered to make positive decisions and achieve a healthier lifestyle;
3. Move away from health metrics based on weight and BMI;
4. Remove calories from menus;
5. Agree to assess the reasons behind an individual's weight; and
6. Put together a focus group with stakeholders with eating disorders, health issues, and nutritionists to discuss the plans more forward.

We look forward to working with you to achieve a long-term obesity strategy that avoids a scrupulous and psychologically damaging focus on weight, calorie counting, and BMI. We also look forward to receiving a

swift response to our letter and to engaging with you on this important issue.

With kind regards,

Hope Virgo Author and Founder of #DumpTheScales

Zoe London, DJ/Influencer

Katie Thistleton, radio presenter

Natasha Devon MBE, Campaigner and Author

Cameron Molland, Undergraduate Student, University of Oxford

Eva Steinhardt, Office of Wera Hobhouse MP

Dr Kate Middleton, Director of the Mind and Soul Foundation

Andrew Gwynne MP

Allan Dorans MP

Chris Evans MP

Sweda UK

Dr Anna Colton, Clinical psychologist & eating disorders specialist

Catherine Perry, Specialist CBT Therapist

James Connolly, Personal Trainer, Nutritional Advisor

Tom Rehair, Eating Disorder Campaigner

Ceri Stokes, Assistant Head and Safeguarding Lead

Thomas Farnell, Safeguarding and Welfare Officer

Fiona Murden BSc MA MSc Cpsychol, Occupational Psychologist and Managing Director of Aroka LTD

Caitlin Lange, Paediatric Nursing Student

Ciara Graham, Pharmacy Advisor

Hannah Lewis, PhD Student in eating disorder prevention and Expert-by-Experience

Grace McIntosh, ChildCare Educator

Emily Mae Watson, Clinical Psychology Student

Rachael Newham, Author and Founder of ThinkTwice

Harriet Few, Eating disorder Therapist

Lottie Drynan, Events Manager and Influencer

Helen Missen, FEAST Board Member, Global Task Force, Chair

Natasha Kleeman, Founder of the Recovery Club

Dr Mark Anderson, Teacher

Hayley Jackson, Teacher

Lauren Craner, Teacher

Zoe Aston, Therapist and Mental Health consultant

Belinda Rich, Trainee Psychotherapist

Jo Hopton, Psychology Student

Dr Jenna Daku, Psychotherapist and Intuitive Eating Counsellor

Verity Hill, Special Educational Needs Coordinator

Emma Chiddle, Recovery Worker

Connor Spratt, Recovery Worker

Cara Sturgess, Senior Nurse Practitioner

Sally Baker, Senior Therapist

Louisa Rose, Social Media Consultant and Mental Health Advocate

Isabelle Zanker, Badminton Coach

Anneli Roberts, Blogger

Bethany White, Campaigner

Molly Forbes, Campaigner & Writer

Maddy Self, Casting Director

Ilona Burton, Casting Producer and Campaigner

Laura Hirons, Photographer

Eleanor Taylor, PR and Marketing Account Manager

Natalia Sloam, PR/Content Manager, XenZone

Katie Rose, Preschool Assistant

Jo Shipley, Dispensing assistant in a GP surgery

Christina Taylor, Protection Underwriter

Emily Hoskins, Receptionist

Hannah Steiner, Consultant

Adam Fare, Data Analyst Transport Planning

Emily Louise Lockhart, Student

Mya Grace Gurrin, Student

Alice Cundick, Student

Katie Moffat, Student

Reena J- Jagdish

David Rackliff, Aircraft Electrical Engineer

Sapphire Taylor, Assistant Producer

Emily Cook, Freelance Drama Facilitator

Rachel Morris MBE, GB Paralympic Athlete

Chloe Gunshon, Graduate Accountant

Victoria McNish, Eating Disorder Champion

Andrew Nixon, Retail Manager

Isabel Pritchard, Dancer & Dance Teacher

Alicia Jackson, Student

Emma Baker, Student

Charlie Mason, Video Editor

Lianne Shakespeare, Primary School Teacher

Kerstin Schmutz, Chef

Paul Haywood, Head Chef

Kate Tilston, Life Coach

Emily Dinmore, Shop Assistant

Angela Chesworth, Obesity Patient Advocate

Share this page



Subscribe to our mailing list

* indicates required

Email Address *

First Name

Last Name

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

We take care to protect and respect any personal data you share with us. For information on how we use your data, check out our [privacy policy](#)

Latest tweet

Tweets by
[@CentreforMH](#)



Centre for Mental Health
[@CentreforMH](#)

"Healthy weight management is tied to your mental health, to poverty, to relationships. It's so incredibly complicated" [@_Sarah_Hughes_](#) shares a personal perspective on the Government's new obesity strategy: [youtube.com/watch?v=IFqUj-...](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFqUj-...)

[Embed](#)[View on Twitter](#)

All images on this site (apart from images of our staff) are used for illustrative purposes only and any people depicted in them are models who have no relationship to the subjects we work on.

Charity registration no. 1091156. A company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 4373019

© 2008 - 2020 Centre for Mental Health

[TERMS & CONDITIONS](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[CONTACT](#)

[JOBS](#)

contact@centreformentalhealth.org.uk
020 3927 2924