Innovation is needed to tackle the dangers of child obesity.

While the UK government talks about "lights at the end of the Corona tunnel" and we are all more hopeful, we are facing another pandemic: obesity. It is a major impediment to personal growth and economic development, placing a heavy burden on the sustainability of our health systems. A simple web search will pull up plenty of statistics about the dire state of obesity in the UK, and we are heading into further troubled waters. So what to do?

First, let's bust a myth. Obesity is caused by complex interactions among many factors, including but by no means limited to, lifestyle choices.. Many genes are associated with obesity, and scientists are unclear on how to piece that puzzle together. Parental and cultural habits that are with us from birth around eating, moving, sleeping, and spending free time are influential. Tragically, foods and drinks that are high in fat, sugar and salt are cheaper than healthy alternatives, and easily accessible. Broadening the scope, economic, ethnic and cultural differences impact health inequality. This is manifested in the quality of education and health services, the level of employment and degree of health awareness in the community.

Such complexity can only be addressed by inclusive, integrated, multi-factorial initiatives. Creative use of taxation, reformulation of products, experimentation in schools and a lot of strategic declarations have all been put forward with little positive and lasting results. Taking a closer look, we find these ventures are siloed, each pushing their own agendas with no alignment with each other, no cross sector parlance, and the capacity of local communities (and therefore the target audience!) to coalesce around the problem is not developed. This is THE fundamental failure in tackling obesity.

The right approach is to start with young children whose habits are not fully formed, and enable them to become the agents of change. Do this with an engaging digital game and allow the children to exert real influence on their parents, as has been proven to be effective with campaigns against smoking and for buckling up your seat belts while driving.

I set up *The Wonder of Me* as a social enterprise with the aim of transforming children into smart decision makers with respect to healthy eating. We do this via a game that develops the children's judgment and anticipation skills, curiosity about food-related topics, and the confidence and power to influence their parents.

The "Change Tree" digital game was created by children for children, with guidance from behaviour-change and nutrition experts. The children care for the tree and win rewards that allow them to shop at a supermarket mock-up called the "food patch". Through growing a healthy tree, children learn that it is the size and variety of food choices that determine the health of a meal, not the nature of the foods themselves. The game was pilot tested with great success, the feedback incorporated into a new iteration, and we learned further lessons about the confusion around food issues in the general public, and parenting habits around children's food choices.

The digital game will be tested among 500 children in 6 schools, in preparation to launch early in 2022. I am currently preoccupied with funding. I am happy to answer any questions and eager to listen to your experiences and suggestions for improvement.

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