

Councillor Deirdre Mackay

Obesity

13 January 2012

It's traditional at the start of a new year to wish everyone their good health, and I do.

The Registrar General for Scotland has good news for new arrivals this year in our communities.

For males, life expectancy at birth in our North Highland Community Health Partnership area is now an average 77 years, an increase of 4 years on the previous decade.

For females, life expectancy at birth is 81 years, an increase of 2.5 years over the

However as lifestyles have changed over recent decades, the toast to good health may now be taking on more of a concern.

Obesity, a disease principally of lifestyle, has various chilling descriptions such as "a major public health concern", "epidemic", "time bomb" with an impact on society that "will hit us before climate change"

Today Scotland has the unwelcome distinction of having one of the highest rates of obesity across the whole of Europe – amongst the top five fattest girths.

The cost of drugs used in the treatment of obesity in NHS Highland in the past decade has risen over ten-fold, from £21,000 to £260,000.

And with obesity comes a host of other diseases linked to lifestyle such as diabetes.

At the start of last year, there were 13,900 on the diabetes register in NHS Highland, some 4 per cent of the population. 12,100 of those have Type 2 diabetes, and one condition amongst a list of risk factors for the disease is being overweight.

There's no doubt that obesity is a preventable disease, and that to tackle it means taking a decision to change the behaviour and accept a responsibility to stay with it.

However, whereas it is vital that the rise in obesity is reversed as quickly as possible, the reality is that significant reductions in the prevalence of a major disease come slowly.

Take for example, coronary heart disease (CHD) which is also a preventable disease linked with obesity and other lifestyle decisions.

Governments of all political stripes have made the significant reduction of its incidence a top health priority.

In 1999, a target was set to reduce the number of deaths from CHD by half amongst those aged under 75. By what date ? 2010, 11 years in the future.

The good news that the target, (increased to a 60 per cent reduction in 2004) had been achieved was announced last month.

Sadly, 182 people in that age group in the NHS Highland area still died from CHD in 2010,

Changes that occur through abandoning damaging behaviour can occur at frustratingly slow rates.

Cigarette smoking is heavily implicated as the cause of many diseases, yet 25 per cent of Scots adults still smoke.

That's down by just 6 per cent since 1999, after millions of pounds spent on anti-smoking measures and the introduction of a ban on smoking in public places.

Child obesity is of particular concern, because it is a strong indicator of obesity in adulthood.

Scottish Government statistics indicate that in the North Highland Community Health Partnership area a survey of 346 Primary 1 pupils in 2009/10 found that 10 per cent were obese.

Doctors stress the importance of a switch away from sedentary life styles, the related lack of exercise and high energy calorie-rich foods with a "special emphasis in schools on how to provide healthy meals on a low income."

They call for more funding and easier access to sport and recreation outlets within schools and their surrounding communities, and advocate a ban on the advertising of unhealthy food and drink to children before the 9pm watershed.

NHS Highland and Highland Council are working together to tackle childhood obesity through a range of measures through the Highland Healthy Weight Strategy.

There was good news from the council's survey of 5,000 primary and secondary last year : the vast majority are happy, healthy enjoying good relations within families and amongst friends.

Their consumption of fruit and vegetables is up, as is their uptake of school meals, all of which is promising progress.

Physical activity levels have shrunk significantly since earlier times at work, in school and at home.

In the past, leisure and manual work required much more effort, there was no "school run", and children walked to school.

Children's games have moved from the street outside to the computer in the child's bedroom, to accompany that earlier icon of sedentary leisure – the TV set.

Today's activities all require far less energy than before, but the carbohydrate-high meals and snacks of today that are not burned off through activity pile on the pounds.

This is where education about nutrition is important, concentrating on the family, because it can help to establish good eating habits that can be passed round and down the family chain.

Like tackling climate change, tackling obesity is something that we cannot afford not to do.

However, every organisation involved in tackling obesity has the same realistic message: "No one is saying that this will be easy".

So for all of those who by whatever appropriate method – increased physical activity, healthier food and diets – want to lose weight or retain their weight loss, I wish you all a happy and healthy new year, and thank you for setting an example that others can follow.