

STATE OF ISRAEL

**Ministry of Health
Jerusalem**

Department of International Relations

25 February 2004
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Ref: mo-camus

Dr. Catherine Le Gal -Camus
Assistant Director-General
Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health
World Health Organization
CH-1211 Geneva 27
Switzerland

25th February 2004

Dear Dr. Le Gal -Camus,

**Re: Israel supports the Global Strategy
on Diet, Physical Activity and Health**

I am pleased to inform you that Israel will support the adoption of the draft on the above mentioned subject which is planned to be discussed during the 57th World Health Assembly in May 2004.

Israel supports the strategy and finds it important and essential to promote global health. The Background to the Strategy expresses the need for global collaboration in order to tackle the global etiology and outcomes. Chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, stroke, cancers and respiratory diseases account for 59% of the 56.5 million disease-related death annually, and much of the global disease burden is related diet.

While the U.S., with 65% of adults overweight, is the world leader, the obesity problem is global. In 1995, there were an estimated 200 million obese adults worldwide. By 2000, that number had increased to over 300 million. It is well known that the poor are at the highest risk for NCDs. To promote health in these sectors, global efforts and investments should be made.

Some question the scientific basis of the Strategy. Nutrition and other health professionals in Israel have examined this issue. We must emphasize that we should search for more research and evidence, but we do find the current evidence extremely strong and we do have a firm basis for the needed strategy, its tools and actions. Of course, Israel recommends monitoring the scientific data and advances over time, after the adoption of the Strategy.

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Some would like to address the problem of under-nutrition and less so that of obesity and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). It is true that the strategy was developed to address NCDs. Nevertheless, the tools presented in the strategy should be applied to address micronutrient deficiencies and under-nutrition, as well. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the obesity epidemic is not restricted to industrialized societies.

In developing countries, it is estimated that while over 115 million people suffer from obesity, diet and weight-related health problems affect many hundreds of millions more. Moreover, it is well documented that even obese people could have micronutrient deficiencies. Consumption of high nutrient density foods and a wholesome diet are needed to both decrease the rate of NCDs and combat micronutrient deficiencies.

Some claim that there are no “good” or “bad foods” and that there are only “good” or “bad diet”. In fact, food companies spend enormous amount of money on marketing because they want people to eat more of their products. The produced food items are not tailored pieces in a puzzle and are not intended to form a healthy diet. Each food industry markets its products. In Israel we are promoting food items and not only good diet. We view the Strategy as an important tool for us to guide dietary goals.

From our experience in Israel, it is clear that the industry, when being guided by the health authorities, has the willingness and the capabilities needed to promote health. It is better when food companies appreciate their responsibility and their ability in promoting health. They are well experienced and carry out thorough investigations in order to devise effective marketing programs that could be used to improve health. The Israeli industry is involved in many national tasks like fighting obesity, decreasing salt, decreasing fat and sugar content of food items, etc. Still, some companies do not even seem to be expected to share the responsibility of the outcome when the populations consume their products.

The Finnish experience has taught us all that a sustained and comprehensive national action can generally lead to much healthier diet and greatly reduce the rates of NCDs. The Finnish strategy, which is well documented in international health literature, is very much in line with the Global Strategy, thus providing strong evidence for the proposed Strategy.

A global WHO strategy would be of great support to many countries, including Israel. We agree that a this Strategy can make the right environment that will empower people to resume responsibility for their health. The strategy is a lever that mobilizes national policy and create the conditions that motivate and change attitudes and behaviors of the individuals. The Strategy, with its menu-like offering of tools, provide the member states with the options to use in their settings.

Again, we thank the WHO-secretariat and will make all the efforts needed to promote healthy diet, physical activity and health and to reduce NCDs.

Yours sincerely,

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Dr. Yitzhak Sever
Director
Department of International Relations