

追求完美？

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Chasing Fitness?

A Study into Health Awareness of Youths in Hong Kong

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SUMMARY REPORT

1. Introduction

Good health has long been regarded as a valuable goal for many people. With the advent of rapid urban development, affluence, environmental protection and community-based education, the concept of “health” has extended beyond “not being sick”. It has come to mean maintaining a distinguished appearance, keeping fit, avoiding obesity or being over-weight, doing preventive medical check-up or chasing for bodily fitness. With health awareness getting popular in the past ten years, it has been observed that youth consumer markets have been flooded with health food, and products, aerobic classes, fitness exercise equipments, health check-up programs, and even foot massage gadgets. The widening concept of health has become part of life for many youngsters.

The main objectives of this study are to examine attitudes and behavior of youth in Hong Kong in relation to “health” and “fitness”. Through an opinion survey of young people and in-depth focus group interviews, we hope to find out more about health consciousness of young people in Hong Kong. This information will provide guidelines for services and policies in the area.

2. Methodology

Extensive literature review, focus group interviews as well as an opinion survey approach were adopted. For the focus group interviews, a total of 17 young people were interviewed in four different groups to tap the qualitative data. Respondents were referred from various children and youth centres of the Federation. The interviews were conducted from 28 to 31 October 1997. All interviews lasted for one to two hours using uniform sets of open-ended questionnaires. Throughout the interviews, respondents were encouraged to express their opinions and feelings freely. For the opinion survey, standard Public Opinion Program (POP) sampling procedures developed by the Social Sciences Research Centre of the University of Hong Kong were employed. Telephone numbers were first randomly selected from the telephone directories as seed numbers. Subsequently, by employing the plus/minus single drift method, additional numbers were gathered from seed numbers to capture possible unlisted numbers. All numbers were then mixed at random to provide the final telephone sample. The telephone survey was conducted between 10 and 14 November 1997. A total of 522 young people, aged from 15 to 29, was successfully interviewed. The response rate was 35.5 per cent, whereas the standard error was less than 2.2 per cent.

3. Findings from Respondents

- 3.1 On questions about physical health and appearance, if 100 marks indicated total concern, 0 marks indicated a total absence of concern and 50 marks means pass. Using this scale, our research shows that concern about physical appearance gained an average rating of 70.4. This was followed by the concern for health (66.4), developing good eating habits (62.9) and skin care (61.8).
- 3.2 When asked on the characteristics of “health food”, over half (54.0%) of the respondents point to their nutritional values. About one-fifth (20.9%) of the young people believe natural character of the food is important. Another one-fifth (20.5%) prefer low cholesterol and low fat.
- 3.3 Only one-quarter (25.0%) of the respondents work out frequently. More than one-third (38.2%) work out occasionally. Another 13.2% of respondents never have physical exercise.
- 3.4 Ball games (62.0%), jogging (31.0%) and swimming (15.7%) rank as the top three exercises by the respondents. A majority of the young people work out in playgrounds and indoor sport centres (57.7%) or outdoor areas (27.4%). Some significant portion (10.1%) do their exercises at commercial health clubs, fitness centres or at facilities at their residents. It is statistically significant that professionals, para-professionals, clerical and those with a service industry background prefer to use these commercial facilities.
- 3.5 The purposes of working out are: prevent illness (27.2%), followed by keeping fit (25.1%), for fun (24.9%) and relaxation (7.9%).
- 3.6 While nearly two-third (65.1%) of the respondents indicate satisfaction with their figures, the other one-third (34.2%) indicate the opposite and believe they are overweight. More than one-quarter (25.9%) of the young people have involved themselves in various weight-loss activities within the last one year. This is particularly noticeable for female respondents. Over half (53.9%) of them also express that weight-loss would make them feel more beauty.
- 3.7 While most of the respondents (70.1%) monitor their weight by working out or regulating their diets, a significant portion (29.0%) of the young people choose the path of using natural food and herb, joining weight-loss plans, taking weight-control products or different health food of various nature.
- 3.8 A vast majority of the respondents (88.0%) believe the method they use for weight-loss would not harm their health. A comparable amount (82.5%) of the respondents also indicate that they had never considered the safety of the products before taking/using them. Their confidence and belief in the products is largely based on the following: “some friends were using the products” (19.6%), “other people were using the products” (14.4%), they had experienced no obvious negative effect after using the products (11.2%), “natural products should not be harmful” (10.6%), “the manufacturer claimed that the products were medically proven” (10.4%), “the products had already registered in other countries” (8.0%) and assuming the products “safe when the government of Hong Kong allows them to be sold in the market” (7.2%).

- 3.9 On deciding to use which products, a significant proportion of the respondents base their judgments on newspaper or magazine articles (44.0%), friends' or relatives' experiences (23.4%) as well as on information provided by advertisements of the weight-loss or health food products (15.4%). While almost two-third (63.5%) of the respondents doubt the reliability of these advertisements, over one-quarter (26.7%) of them indicate that they tend to believe these advertisements.
- 3.10 The findings of the survey indicate that near three-quarter (74.2%) of the respondents go to bed after 11:00 p.m. for at least four nights per week. Over one in ten (11.2%) respondents indicate going to bed as late as 1:00 a.m. regularly. More than two-third (65.9%) of the young people say they spend the late part of the evening watching television, listening to the radio, watching video-CD or reading. Another one-quarter (27.8%) say they spend these mid-night hours for doing homework, revision or household affairs. Most (80.2%) of the respondents say they feel quite relax in these hours.
- 3.11 Research results also indicate that near three-quarter (73.4%) of the respondents had not have any medical check-ups for the last two years. For those who did, over one-third (37.8%) received it through medical check-up scheme of the Department of Health. Having lung X-rays (25.7%), testing blood sugar (18.0%) and checking eyes (11.7%) were the most popular items for examination.
- 3.12 A portion (14.8%) of the respondents also indicate that they are occasional or frequent smokers.
- 3.13 On attitudes towards achieving optimum health, over one-third (35.1%) of the respondents think that it is easy to know, but difficult to practise. Another one-quarter (24.4%) say not taking any action is the norm. Only a small portion (7.7%) of the young people said they regularly do things to improve their health.
- 3.14 Finally, on the question of the definition of "real health", over two-fifth (40.7%) of the respondents define it in terms of "body's balance and a positive state of well-being", followed by "freedom from major disease or minor complaints" (30.6%) and feeling "energetic and having improved endurance" (27.3%).

4. Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

(1) Young People are Concerned Most about Physical Appearance, Followed by Health, Eating Habits and Skin Care.

The survey results show that if 100 marks indicated total concern, 0 marks indicated a total absence of concern and 50 marks means pass, concern over physical appearance gained an average rating of 70.4. It was followed by concern about health (66.4), eating habits (62.9) and skin care (61.8).

It is clear from the survey that young people today are very much concerned about their physical appearance. This issue appears even more important than health in their lives. The perception of health has gradually moved away from the traditional concept of absence of major disease or minor complaints. Instead, “health” has begun to be combined with “fitness” and “sliminess”. A new definition of “real health”, according to the opinions of the respondents in this study, should include fitness, sliminess, body’s balance, a positive state of well being, energetic, improved endurance, and so forth. The incorporation of “slim beauty” as part of or an indication of real health is predominant in our findings. The significant concern of physical appearance and skin care over health and eating habits has many implications on health education and health services for the young people.

(2) Only a Small Proportion of Young People Has Regular Worked Out or Has Medical Check-Up. Over Half of the Respondents Habitually Sleep Late. One-Tenth of the Respondents are Regular or Frequent Smokers.

The survey results show that only one-quarter (25.0%) of the respondents works out frequently. More than one-third (38.2%) worked out occasionally. Another 13.2% of respondents never work out. This shows that our younger generation is not very keen on work-out. In the meantime, research results also indicate that nearly three-quarter (73.4%) of the respondents had not have any medical check-up for the last two years. A proportion (14.8%) of those surveyed also express that they are occasional or regular smokers. This clearly shows that health consciousness to prevent illness is not yet popular among the young people.

The findings of the survey also indicated that nearly three-quarter (74.2%) of the respondents sleep later than 11:00 p.m. for at least four nights per week. Over one in ten (11.2%) even sleeps later than 1:00 a.m. regularly. More than two-third (65.9%) of the young people say they spend the evening time for watching television, listening to the radio, watching video-CD or reading. Another one-quarter (27.8%) spend these mid-night hours for doing homework, revision or attending to household affairs. Although most of the respondents (80.2%) indicate that they are quite relaxed in these hours, it is doubtful if young people’s habitually late sleeping practice will not affect their concentration and performance at school and work. Nevertheless, the twilight-lover scene seems to be the prevailing lifestyle of our young today.

(3) A Majority of the Young People Work Out in Playgrounds, Indoor Sport Centres or Outdoor Areas, While Some Significant Portion Exercises at Commercial Fitness Clubs. One-Third of our Respondents Are Dissatisfied with Their Figures. One-Fourth Works Out for Weight-Loss.

A majority of the young people work out in playgrounds and indoor sport centres (57.7%) or outdoor areas (27.4%). Some significant portion (10.1%) exercise at commercial health clubs, fitness centres or exercise facilities of their residents. Although reasons for working out varies from person to person, it is remarkable that weight-control

(25.1%) comprises over one-fourth of the answers from the respondents. In the meantime, a comparable amount (24.2%) have been involved in various weight-loss activities within the last year. And one-third of the respondents (34.2%) clearly express that they are dissatisfied with their figures.

As already stated, the perception of “real health” has mingled with “sliminess”, “fitness” and “beauty” for the young people. The above findings further substantiate this changing views of youth in Hong Kong.

(4) A Significant number of Respondents Take Weight-Control Products or Join Weight-Loss Plans. A Vast Majority of Young People Believes These Methods Are Not Harmful. One-Quarter Deems Product Advertisements Reliable.

While most (70.1%) of the respondents monitor their weight by working out or regulating their diets, a significant portion (29.0%) of the young people choose the path of using natural food and herb, joining weight-loss plans, taking weight-control products or taking different health food of various nature.

Furthermore, a vast majority (88.0%) of the respondents believes that the methods they use for losing weight would not harm their bodies. A comparable number (82.5%) of the respondents also indicate that they had not ever considered the safety of the products before taking them. Their confidence is largely based on the following: “some friends were using the products” (19.6%), “other people were using the products” (14.4%), not having an obvious negative effects after using the products” (11.2%), “natural products should not be harmful” (10.6%), “the manufacturer claimed that the products were medically proven” (10.4%), “the products had already registered in other countries” (8.0%) and assuming the products safe when the government of Hong Kong allows their sale in the market (7.2%).

On deciding to use which products, a significant proportion of the respondents based their judgments on articles in newspapers or magazines (44.0%), experiences of friends or relatives (23.4%) as well as information supplied by the advertisers of the weight-loss or health food products (15.4%). While almost two-third (63.5%) of the respondents have doubts on the reliability of advertisements, over one-quarter (26.7%) of the young people indicate that they tend to believe them.

These figures illustrate clearly the power and influence of advertising on consumers in marketing of commercial products. As the survey reveals, many consumers rely on the information of the advertisement as well as on the personal experiences of their friends or relatives. The information accuracy of advertisement, therefore, is a crucial matter for both consumer protection and public safety. This is specially the case for weight-loss and health food products. Counting merely on the self-discipline and honesty of drug importers or food manufacturers may jeopardize health and well-being of the general public.

(5) Nutritional Supplements of Various Kind are becoming Popular in The Current Health Food Market.

As the survey reveals, traditional Chinese herbal tea and jelly (60.8%) are received well and used widely by the young people. The popularity of these products are followed by mineral drinks (58.5%), fibre food and drinks (21.5%), vitamins, calcium, iron or protein supplements (15.6%), liver oil or fish nutritional supplements (9.1%), essence of chicken (6.2%), herbal baths (6.8%), Chinese herbal products or drugs (5.1%) as well as apple vinegar (4.4%).

The availability and fashionableness of these nutritional supplements in today's health food market, nevertheless, must have implications on public health and consumer protection.

(6) The Existing Legislation on “Drug Registration” and “Food Labelling” Needs to be Clarified Regarding Health Products Which Are or can be Characterized both as “Food” and “Drugs”.

(a) Regulation on health food: “food-control” or “drug-control”?

The existing law in relation to health food is the Food and Drugs (Composition and Labelling) Regulations (Chapter 132 Subsidiary Legislation). If the product is classified as “food”, the labelling of this prepackaged foods stuff should include the following: name or designation, list of ingredients, indication of “best before” or “use by” date, statement of special conditions for storage or instructions of use, name and address of manufacturer or packer, count, weight or volume as well as using the appropriate language of the consumers. These requirements however, constitute a minimum set of requirements that food products must observe to ensure public health.

On the other hand, if the product is classified as a “drug”, a different standard is imposed by the Pharmacy and Poisons Regulations (Chapter 138). Pharmaceutical products and substances must register under this ordinance. The particulars to be registered shall, in the case of a product or a substance, be its name, specifications, label, package insert, the name and addresses of both the manufacturer and the applicant. In the case of a product, additional requirements included dose form, the quantity or quantities of the dose form contained in its unit package or unit packages, the name and quantity of all its active ingredients, the name and quantity of all its excipients, and its proposed indication, dosage and method of administration. In fact, the Department of Health always cautions the public that advice from a physician should be obtained in using pharmaceutical products and substances.

It is interesting to note that most of the health food in the market today are characterized as something in between “food” and “drug”. A vast majority of these products is being promoted as a special type of “food” such as natural food, nutritional supplements, multivitamins, herbal drinks, minerals, proteins, etc. At the same time, advertisements for a large number of these products also advocate their “treatment” functions which usually are features of “drugs”. It is quite common to see the following statements in advertisements of health food: “...regulate hormones...”, “...speeds up the

body's metabolism and then burns up unwanted fat and cholesterol...", "...useful in the treatment of high cholesterol, gallstones, liver cirrhosis and blood-clotting disorders...", "...most powerful herb available to give instant relief from respiratory catarrh...", etc.

It would be necessary to clearly define the status of every individual health food, as either "food" or a "drug", before we can decide the issue of "food-control" or "drug-control".

(b) Is our law effective? - clarification is required.

Section 36(1) of Pharmacy and Poisons Regulations states that "...no person shall sell, offer for sale or distribute or possess for the purposes of sale, distribution or other use any pharmaceutical product or substance unless the product or substance is registered...". It seems quite obvious that many of the health food products in the market today, despite their continued claim of "treatment", are unlikely to have registered under this ordinance.

Section 3(1) of Undesirable Medical Advertisements (Chapter 231) states that "No person shall publish, or cause to be published, any advertisement likely to lead to the use of any medicine, surgical appliance or treatment for (a) the purpose of treating human beings for, or preventing human beings from contracting, any disease...". The interpretation of "medicine" in this ordinance includes "any kind of medicament or other curative or preventive substances, and whether a proprietary medicine, a patent medicine, or purported natural remedy." As earlier stated, the "treatment" functions in many advertisements of the marketed health food are likely, from a literal interpretation of the law, to fall within the definition of "medicine", giving this ordinance. If this is the case, it means that many of these advertisements should be prohibited from publication, or they are at risk of being prosecuted under section 3(1) of this ordinance.

The question is: "Is the existing law effective?". Its clarification seems necessary.

Recommendations

In view of the above discussion and analysis, the Federation recommends:

(1) For Better Educational Effect, The Government Should Consider a Revision of the Health Education for the Young People.

The existing health education syllabus for primary and secondary students covers a wide range of topics, including personal hygiene, balance diet, knowing your body, digestion, exercise and rest, common diseases, knowing drugs, nutrition, and similar topics.

A new Student Health Service under the Department of Health replaced the School Medical Service in 1995. Its main objectives are health promotion, disease prevention and continuity of care. Seven student health service centres and one special assessment centre were opened to provide free health assessment, individual health counselling, health

education and referral services to primary day school students.

School health inspectors from the department also visit schools regularly, advising them on environmental hygiene and sanitation of school premises. School health officers and nurses give advice on the control of communicable diseases, and organize health education activities and immunization campaigns. On the whole, health education for the young people in Hong Kong has attained a fairly good standard.

However, as this survey reveals, young people today are concerned about new things - their physical appearance, skin care, slim figures, weight-loss or keeping fit. Their interests have extended beyond the locus of traditional health education. In order to have better educational results, it is recommended that the government consider a revision of the content of the health education programs.

(2) The Government should Strengthen Public Health Education and to Raise Health Awareness, Particularly for the Young People.

The survey results show that only a small portion of respondents work out regularly and majority of them have not had a medical check-up in the last two years. A significant number of them habitually sleep late and some are smokers. At the same time, health food is widely used by young people without serious consideration to the safety issue. All these indicate that the health consciousness of our next generation need improvement. It is recommended that the government strengthen public health education so as to raise the health awareness of the general public, particularly of the young people.

(3) Health Food should be Registered and a New Category of "Dietary Supplements" Should be Introduced in Addition to the Dichotomy of "Food" and "Drugs".

As the consumer market is flooded with health food products, the existing dichotomy of "food" and "drugs" in our present law seems inadequate to cater for the new changes. Taking into consideration safeguarding public health and protection of the consumer, it is recommended that health food should be required to be registered. A new category of "dietary supplements" should also be introduced. The suggested changes may include the following:

- (i) Health food products which contain pharmaceutical products or substances must be registered under the current Pharmacy and Poisons Regulation.
- (ii) Health food products, which contain no pharmaceutical products or substances but claim to have treatment functions, must be registered as dietary supplements under the current laws or newly enacted legislation. The particulars to be registered shall include the proof of treatment functions, clinical trials and medicinal tests, records of successful cases and so forth. Warning statements about possible side effects of the products should be printed clearly on the label. Approval of registration will be decided by a specialized committee or the existing "Drug Registration Council". A

registration number of dietary supplements will be provided which cannot and should not to be used for any promotional purposes.

In fact, the term "dietary supplements" are currently being used by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the United States in their regulation of food products. This may be a good reference for Hong Kong.

(iii) Health food products which contain no pharmaceutical products and substances, or do not claim any treatment functions, can register, sell and distribute as "food".

(4) The Government Should Consider Legislation on Monitoring Misleading or Undesirable Advertisement For Health Food.

As the findings of the survey indicate that on deciding to use which products, a significant proportion of the respondents based their judgments on information supplied by the advertisers of the weight-loss or health food products. Over one-quarter of the young people indicate that they tend to believe these advertisement. This shows that the information accuracy of advertisement is a crucial matter for both consumer protection and public safety. In order to better protect consumers and safeguard public health, it is recommended that the government should consider necessary legislation on monitoring misleading or undesirable advertisement for health food.