

Can we take the next step now?

Health status and behaviour of adolescents, a pre-congress meeting of the HELENA-project (HEalthy Lifestyle in Europe by Nutrition in Adolescence)

by

Matthys C¹, De Henauw S¹, Moreno L², on behalf of the HELENA Study group

In a recent editorial of 'Public Health Nutrition', Barrie Margetts raise the question "Are we paying enough attention to adolescent nutrition?" (1). His answer is clear and univocal; "NO". In his editorial, Prof Margetts refers to the double burden of undernutrition and obesity in South African children, but the general idea of his editorial is in line with our HELENA Study, funded by the 6th Framework Programme of the Directorate General Research of the European Commission. Adolescence is critical period in physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Adolescence represents a window of opportunities to prepare for a healthy adult life, therefore as mentioned by Margetts "it is a key period to ensure that the wider environment in which young people become adults is optimal for both their social and physical development."¹

One of the basic objectives of the HELENA-project cross-sectional multicentre study was to obtain reliable and comparable data from a selected cohort of European adolescents (boys and girls aged 13–16 years) on a broad battery of relevant nutrition and health-related parameters: dietary intake, food choices and preferences, anthropometry, serum indicators of lipid metabolism and glucose metabolism, vitamin and mineral status, immunological markers, physical activity, fitness and genetic markers (2).

From an administrative point of view, the HELENA-project officially finished at the end of October 2008. Nowadays, the offspring of HELENA research work is created and born. This special volume of the 'Archives of Public Health' has the great honour to describe the first summary of the overall results of the HELENA-project. This special issue reflects the content of the first post HELENA-symposium. The different work package leaders presented their work. The topics varied from lifestyle risk factors (e.g. diet, physical activity, physical fitness and stress), epidemiology of obesity & related disorders in EU (e.g. body composition, cardiovascular risk factors, metabolic syndrome) to metabolic complications of obesity in adolescents (e.g. inflammation and genetic markers). Further, this pre-congress meeting invited researchers to submit their work for an oral or poster presentation. The organisers received more than 30 abstracts all related to adolescent nutrition. This first post HELENA

¹ Department of Public Health, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium

² Escuela Universitaria de Ciencias de la Salud, Universidad de Zaragoza, Zaragoza, Spain

symposium had the honour to announce its first HELENA – Young Investigators' Award. Young researcher, just out of their adolescence, awarding is maybe a first step to reach an optimal adult nutrition.

One of the general conclusions that can be drawn based on collected data of the HELENA-project, is that we have an idea of the European adolescents' health status and behaviour but that we are still searching for the best way to improve the dietary habits of this very important period in our life. This continued search is the next step that should be taken, by researchers and policy makers, because infants and children are the ones we can guide. Adolescents are those that should be guided, but they do not want hear the concept of being guided.

The organising committee would like to thank all the speakers, the researchers that submitted abstracts, the participants and the whole HELENA "family". We would like to end with a personalised version of a Buddhist expression "every end has a start" (originally every start has an end). A start of our search to optimal adolescent nutrition.

References

1. Margetts B. Are we paying enough attention to adolescent nutrition? *Public Health Nutr.* 2009;12(2):145.
2. Moreno LA, De Henauw S, González-Gross M, Kersting M, Molnár D, Gottrand F, Barrios L, et al. Design and implementation of the Healthy Lifestyle in Europe by Nutrition in Adolescence Cross-Sectional Study. *Int J Obes (Lond).* 2008; 32 Suppl 5:S4-11.