

Abstract

Dieting is a trendy habit. This craze hits both the obese and normal community. Individuals in all age groups discuss and attempt to lose weight regardless of practical needs. Numerous products are found in the market which claims to be able to assist in weight losing. Unfortunately, regulations on these products are limited, especially in Macao SAR. Several incidents have revealed the problems related to these products, such as the Sibutramine (西布曲明) situation. On the 19th February 2005 the Hong Kong Health Committee ordered a recant of a weight losing products “Absolean (營養修身)” because the product contain a medical active compound called Sibutramine (西布曲明). Sibutramine is a prescriptive medical compound that can suppress appetite but with adverse side effects including an increase in the blood pressure and heart rate.

OBJECTIVES: The general aim of the research project is to examine the public behavior and awareness of weight losing productions, to facilitate in the formulation of relevant regulations or policy on such productions. Two separate studies executed to illustrate the prevalence of the weight losing products in the market and the problems about the misleading claims found on these products; to demonstrate the necessity of establishing a regulatory system for weight losing products in Macao SAR.

METHODS: The first study – magazine information surveying; two top selling magazines in Macao SAR were examined to calculate the frequency of advertising weight losing products on these magazines. In the second study, 450 questionnaires were distributed and 262 were recollected. These questionnaires were designed with 21 questions inquiring about participants’ weight-losing practices and their actual results, public understanding of the statistical results provided by some of the products and the effectiveness of some of the products was analyzed according to the responses. The quantity and the quality of government regulatory policy were analyzed.

RESULTS: In the first study, the percentage of diet relating advertisements was found to be approximately 20% (for Next magazine) and 25% (for East magazine). This number is the second highest among all the other categories. The promotion of weight-losing practice is popular and extensive. In the second study, a total of 450 questionnaires have been prepared and distributed. Two hundred and sixty two papers are recollected. The percentage of respond is 58%. The respondents include: 69 males, 136 females and 57 unidentified. The participants include 35 age 6-15, 109 age 16-25, 56 age 26-35, 25 age 36-45, 23 age older than 45 and 14 did not identify their age (none). The percentages who want to lose weight are 22% for male, 60% for female and 40% for unidentified. The percentage who practices weight losing is 16% for male, 43% for female

and 28% for unidentified (please refer to figure 2). For the effects of the product, only one subject report a lost of more than 50 pounds, nobody lost more than 30 pounds, 3 lost 20-30 pounds, 16 lost around 10 -20 and 64 reported a lost of less than 10 pounds (two report no weight lost at all). In short, around 76% report a lost of less than 10 pounds (figure 3 and 4). Rebounding incidences are quite serious. Eighty-three percent of the subjects report that rebounding of their body weights do occur. Among them, 42% state that they are either fatter or the same as before they use anyone of the weight losing products (please refer to figure 5 and figure 6). For the statistical knowledge, approximately 80% of the subjects state that they have poor understanding about the statistical facts provided by the manufacturers and more than 80% among those who did attempt to lose weight using various kinds of weight losing methods reported that rebounding does occur. Around 95% of the subjects find that there are too many advertisements on weight losing products in the market. In addition, approximately 85% of the participants regard government regulation of various weight losing products are inadequate. **DISCUSSION:** Advertisement on weight-losing products is the second highest on East Magazine and the third on Next Magazine among all the other categories (please refer to table 1, 2, 3 and 4). This high rank illustrated the popularity of these products in the market. In addition, results from the questionnaires demonstrate that more than 40% of the female and the unidentified respondents did attempt to lose weight using various methods such as taking some dietary supplements, drugs or using some ointments (figure 2). This can reflect the popularity of these services and products in the market. Unfortunately a lot of the people attempt to lose weight not because of their health situation, but because everybody else around them are talking about weight losing and the media is always promoting about it. Results from the questionnaire discovered that only about 20% of the respondents believed that the main reason for people to lose weight was because of health consideration. All the others presumed that fashion and social perspective, especially the image created by the media, were the reasons for losing weight. When comparing the reasons for losing weight with different age groups, the believe about “thin is beautiful and fat is ugly” is the major reason to lose weight for all age groups. However, when considering the reason related to health, the group aged 36 – 45 has the highest preference for this motive (please refer to figure 19 for details). This is understandable as people in this age are more mature and rational in making decisions and are less vulnerable to the misleading claims or advertisements. Numerous of the weight losing related advertisements on the two magazines promoted a speedy way to lose weight. A lot of the products even claim that there will be no rebound after using the products. These products attempt to make their claims more convincing by providing various kinds of statistical

results to verify the effectiveness of the products. The results from the questionnaires in this research demonstrate that about half of the female participants attempt to lose weight using various methods (please refer to figure 2 for detail). On average (for all participants disregarding their sex), around 50% of those who practice weight losing lost less than 5 pounds, yet about 90% reported that rebounding do occur (figure 3, 4, 5 and 6). In addition, around 30% of the individuals who declare that rebounding does occur state that they are either the same or even fatter than before. These results can refute the claims on those weight losing products about speedy lost of many pounds and never rebound. Increasing number of weight losing products manufacturers include various statistical information in their promotion schemes to amplify the convincingness of their claims. However from the questionnaire, it was found that more than 80% of the subjects admitted that their knowledge about statistic was poor or inadequate (figure 7 and 8). The deficiency of statistical knowledge for the general public indicates that the facts provided by the different manufacturers are ineffectual and can be quite misleading. Thus the statistic provided on the advertisement is not for the convenience of the customer but just a marketing scheme for the manufacturer. In Hong Kong and Macao SAR, government regulations on weight losing products are inadequate. Companies can easily advertise these products on television and magazines as long as they can pay for it. These will give consumers a false impression that since the government did not band the promotion of these products these products should be safe and effective. **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMANDATIONS:** These results illustrate that advertisement on weight losing products are common and that general public's appreciation of the scientific evidences and the effectual claims provided by the various weight losing products is problematic and government should set suitable regulations to control these advertising claims.