Funding the Future

The ultra-processed food crisis

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Ultra-processed foods now make up at least half of all food sold in UK supermarkets. The Lancet has described them as a "corporate-engineered public health crisis." That is exactly what they are: industrial products designed for profit, not nutrition. They override appetite control, promote over-consumption, and push out real food alternatives.

These foods are cheap because wages are low, access to fresh food is unequal, and corporate concentration has eliminated choice. The result is a society burdened with obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancers — and an NHS stretched to breaking point. None of this is accidental.

In this video, I explain how ultra-processed food became unavoidable, why it is a systemic economic issue rather than a personal failure, and what the government can do now: from food labelling and advertising bans to taxing ultra-processed products and subsidising real food. We can change this — but only if we confront corporate power.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ8nEeiFmH4?si=1yXzAJd2RwGxy_9J

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=nkxyb-19ce929-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

I want to talk about ultra-processed foods, which have, in the last week, been described by The Lancet, which is the leading health journal in the UK, as a corporate-engineered public health crisis.

Now, let's be clear, ultra-processed foods do not represent personal failure by the people who eat them. They are now at least half of all the food which we are presented with in our supermarkets, and they have been deliberately created by corporate design. Our food system is now oriented to making profit margins and not delivering health, and the consequence is that the NHS is now paying for the sickness that these foods are creating, and that sickness is very real, and you may be suffering from it. So this issue is not just one about policy; it may well be one about you and your future.

As The Lancet put it, "Ultra-processed foods are emblematic of a food system increasingly controlled by transnational corporations that prioritise corporate profits ahead of public health." That one sentence exposes the power imbalance at the heart of this system. These large, multinational companies whose names you will all know, and which I will mention very soon, do not focus on delivering you with nutrition, but focus on creating profit out of what you put on your plate.

For them, corporate profit comes first, and your health comes last. And so far, our government has totally refused to confront this reality.

Ultra-processed foods are industrial products. They're not food as such. You couldn't create them in your kitchen. One of the easiest ways by which you can identify them is the fact that they have ingredients that you simply would never have in your store cupboard if you are used to cooking for yourself, and I have done for quite a long time.

They're built on the basis of industrialised products; things like maize and wheat and soya and palm oil. And these things are now literally industrial products and not just foodstuffs. They are, in turn, reduced to extracts, isolates, emulsifiers, and stabilisers. And then they are recombined with colourings and flavourings, and all of that is engineered to provide a long shelf life, which allows for a significant transport chain in getting the foodstuffs to you. And somewhere way down the line comes nutrition, but it's of no priority.

Quite simply, human health was never a design criterion in creating these toxic products; our food environment has been intentionally redesigned as a result. Real food - that is, basically ingredients from which you can construct a meal - has been priced out of the market or made inaccessible in far too many places.

Ultra-processed foods have been made cheap, omnipresent, and they are also aggressively marketed. They come in bright packages and real food normally comes in a plastic bag after you put them into it in the vegetable section or whatever else of the supermarket, or require that you go to a specific counter to pick up a piece of meat that you want to order, or a piece of fish that you think might suit you, or you might

have to go to a farm shop to get the cheese that you particularly desire. Instead, you get this pre-packaged product.

Those pre-packaged products are designed to push out real food alternatives by creating dominance, and they're engineered to override appetite control. In particular, what they do is make you feel hungry, again, remarkably soon after you've eaten them.

It's not by chance that you want a mid-afternoon snack when you've already had lunch, or that you need elevenses when you had a breakfast or that comes eight o'clock in the evening, despite having had a meal, you now feel as though you want something else to eat: that is engineered in. They are not designed to fill you up, even though you've had plenty enough food to actually meet your needs. They are designed to trigger your hunger pangs, and, therefore, you eat too much.

Which companies are doing this? You know the names Nestle, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Unilever dominate these markets. Their whole business model relies on high-volume, ultra-processed foods. Cheap inputs create high-margin branded outputs under a vast array of names, with a vast array of bright and glossy packaging, which is largely targeted at children and women - because they buy most food - and low-income groups. Corporate concentration is driving this crisis because they control the market and prices and ensure that what reaches our supermarket shelf is the products that they want us to buy.

These products are not designed to satisfy us. The very fact that they are designed to promote over-consumption is part of the business cycle of the companies I'm already talking about. The fact that you will end up being continually hungry drives their profits. And the behavioural responses that they create are exploited for sales purposes. The consequence is to be seen all around you.

Obesity is now a feature of our society. It's not a flaw. It's not your fault. You are being fed food that leads to this outcome in far too many cases. We are bigger than we were because our food makes us that way, and that is not our fault; it is a consequence of the design of food companies that want us to be overweight.

But the consequence is clear and very costly. Obesity, diabetes, and heart disease are rising. Gut disorders and metabolic dysfunctions are escalating. Cancers are growing, and there is some strong evidence, although it is not mentioned in the Lancet article, but I've read others, that there is a strong link between ultra-processed food and cancer growth as well. Chronic illnesses are becoming embedded in communities, and the government talks about this as if it is a personal failure, particularly amongst young people, when in fact it is the consequence of being fed food that does not nourish us, but does do harm.

And we can see the real pressures arising. The NHS budget always grows, and we keep on hearing it being said, " We cannot afford to provide healthcare for everyone," and

we can't, to some degree, but we don't need to. We need to cut the cause of ill health, and the biggest cause of ill health in this country is ultra-processed food, and the corporations that create it are paying nothing for the harm that they are creating.

But there's another consequence as well: ultra-processed food is actually shaping inequality. Low wages drive reliance on cheap calories. I can't pretend otherwise. I know that's a fact. People literally cannot afford to buy other foods when their wages, after paying high rents and high interest charges and high childcare costs, have nothing left over to provide food budgets which are nourishing in the way that I would wish.

This is reality, and that is therefore creating a crisis for those on low wages, exacerbated by the fact that time poverty, and many on low wages face time poverty precisely because they have to work for so many long hours and also provide childcare themselves, that they end up depending upon the convenience of ultra-processed foods at a large human cost to themselves and their children.

And there's another issue as well, and that is that fresh food availability is unequal across the country. It isn't readily available in all food shops. It isn't always available locally. And those without access to places to buy it, and many haven't got that access because they don't have cars or they don't have ready access to public transport at times when they can travel, means that they can't get that fresh food. Again, this is something that is structural injustice. This isn't choice, I recognise that this is imposed and ultra-processed foods are exploiting this for the advantage of these companies and leaving people without the nourishment they need and facing illnesses they don't deserve.

Environmental damage is also built into these foods. They are processed; let's be clear, that's the point about them. There's a large amount of fossil fuel-intensive energy embedded in that food when you buy it. It's not just the heating it up in the microwave or whatever else that creates an energy output in this case. It's all the processing that goes on inside the food, the packaging, the plastics, and everything else to make it reach you. Plus, the total waste of resources in the marketing and the spend that goes along with that, which diverts human activity from things which are productive into things that are environmentally and socially destructive.

And what is more, the monocultures, which are used to support the growth of things like maize and wheat and soya and palm oil, are harmful for biodiversity and our soils. Planetary health is collapsing alongside human health as a consequence of ultra-processed foods.

And so we need to consider how we must address this issue. Deregulation made ultra-processed foods possible by default. Market power has removed alternatives. Corporate lobbying is blocking policy changes, and people eat what the system leaves them and not what they might choose. Responsibility for tackling the problem of ultra-processed food does then inevitably fall down to a system of economic design,

and that means the government has to take action.

So what should the government be doing?

It should be putting warning labels on food, and it should ban child-directed marketing of these products.

It should restrict the use of ultra-processed foods in schools and hospitals, even if they're cheap.

And it should break up the dominant firms if necessary, and most certainly stop further mergers to concentrate their power even more.

One of my suggestions is we should have positive VAT rates of tax charged on ultra-processed foods, and at the same time, we should have negative rates of VAT to make proper whole foods cheaper. Now this does not overcome the immediate problem of access, and that will have to be addressed by regulation, and supermarkets should be required to stock proper whole foods and not ultra-processed ones by law, but once they get there, we can change the price.

Suppose we put up the price of all ultra-processed foods by 20%, but actually reduce the price by having a negative VAT rate of 20% on real foods, we could create a massive price differential between the two, which would have enormous behavioural consequences. We could begin to address the problems. I'm not saying there won't be issues in that, but we have to start looking at such radical moves because we can no longer afford to have corporate power shaping diets in our society.

We cannot sacrifice public health to ultra-processed foods.

We cannot have the NHS overstretched beyond limits because it's dealing with the consequences of obesity and all the other diseases I've mentioned, created by the desire for corporate profits, making people quite literally sick.

We cannot have an ideology that blames individuals instead of systems, but that is what the neoliberal economic system is doing, and we need real change, and that requires courageous politicians who are willing to impose economic control.

The government could act tomorrow if it chose, and that's my key point. If we wanted, we could end the curse of ultra-processed foods, and we'd all be healthier as a consequence, and we'd all live in a state which would cost less to maintain.

So there's a poll down below. Would you be willing to eat less ultra-processed food if you lived better as a consequence? Do you think we should use the tax system to regulate ultra-processed foods? Should the government change the rules so that we know how toxic the things that we are being offered to eat really are? Should we ban advertising of ultra-processed foods to children? Let us know. There's a poll, and you

can provide us with your opinion.

Poll

[poll id="260"]

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