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Topic: Community health and nutrition programs

Title: Perceptions of school food vendors about the food they sell and childhood obesity

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Abstract

Background: Childhood obesity is increasing in developing and developed countries. This epidemic is driven by numerous factors including poor dietary intake. Children spend most of their time in schools and thus has influence on their dietary intake habits. School food environment can play a role in the development and prevention of childhood obesity. School food vendors are important role players in food provision within schools. This study assessed perceptions of school food vendors about food they sell and their willingness to sell food that may prevent childhood obesity.

Methodology: Qualitative study, consisting of fifteen in-dept interviews with food vendors in primary schools, was conducted in Khayelitsha an urban township in Cape Town, South Africa. In addition, observations using a structured checklist were conducted to determine types of foods sold by food vendors. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data.

Results: Food items mostly sold were snacks including sweets and chips, and food vendors perceived them as unhealthy. However, justification for selling unhealthy food included children's preferences, cost and profit. Majority were willing to sell healthy food but had concerns of losing sales and additional stock cost when purchasing products outside their communities.

Conclusions: This study suggests that food vendors understand that the food they sell is unhealthy, however their main concern is cost and profitability than health, as selling food is part of their livelihood. This study also shows that all stakeholders who have influence on learner's dietary intake should be considered when developing intervention strategies in schools.