

'Let's go to war on diabetes'

■ Doctor says diabetes will get worse before it improves ■ Calls for public awareness programmes on healthy living

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Diabetes will get worse before it gets better in the UAE, a leading doctor has warned, adding that it needs to be tackled on a 'war footing'.

"We believe that the [diabetes numbers] can be controlled and eventually decreased. In the past five years, however, we have only seen an increase, which means there will be a boom before it reverses," said Dr Maha Barakat, the medical and research director at the Imperial College London Diabetes Centre (ICLDC).

She was responding to an *Emirates Today* request for her view on the UAE's diabetes issue, which an expert has warned could soon threaten the existence of Emiratis, who are considered to be at the most risk.

"Diabetes is currently the fastest growing debilitating disease in the world. In the UAE today at least 20 per cent of the population is living with it. This is not a small number, but what has to be understood is that it can be managed and in many cases prevented," Dr Barakat said.

The ICLDC recently

declared that diabetes was likely to afflict 65 per cent of the population in 2010, taking population growth into consideration.

Dr Barakat said more proactive measures were needed in the UAE to help reduce the number of diabetics.

"Tackling diabetes on a 'war footing' is maybe the right way to phrase it. What we intend to do is to detect, prevent and treat it. Diabetes should be considered as one of the country's leading health issues and should be tackled through awareness and lifestyle changes. Equally important is the treatment of it and its complications with the most up-to-date evidence-based medicine," she said.

Regarding the need for regulation on food advertising, food labelling, nutritional content and physical activity in schools, Dr Barakat was not particularly supportive of the measures that are being considered in many other countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom to protect people from unnecessary health threats.

"Regulations could be the solutions, but they sometimes are not very effective.

"Increased education in

schools to help reduce children's vulnerability and equip them with knowledge and tools to make decisions about their own health choices may be more effective.

"Not only children, parents and adults should also be well informed as they are the ones who can influence their children through healthy actions.

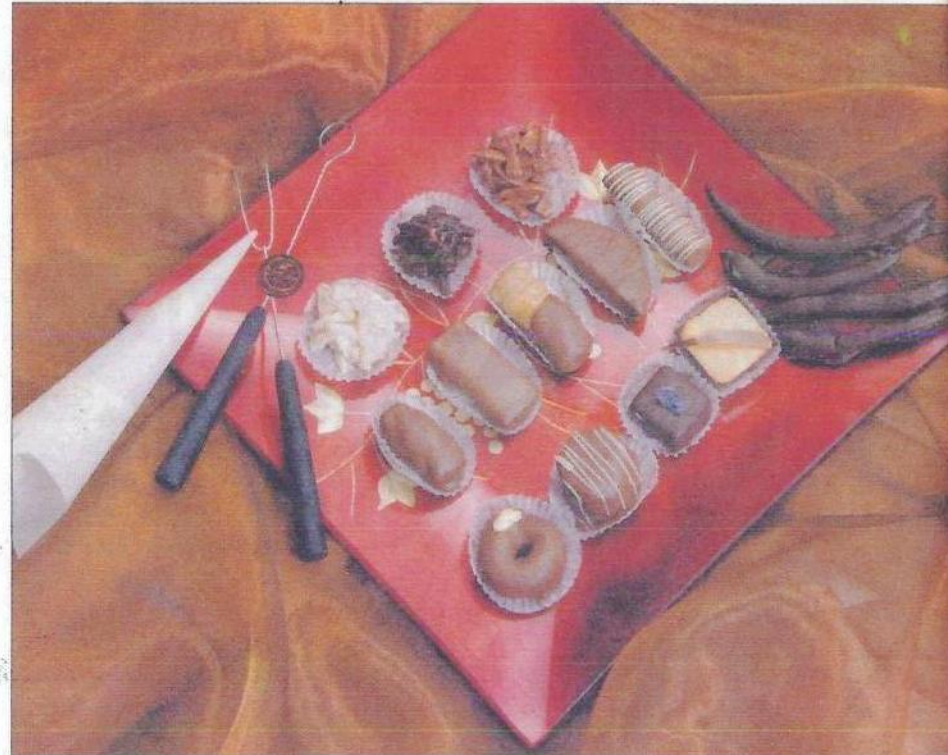
"Schools can also introduce sport activities as part of the curriculum thus encouraging children to be physically active," she said.

Dr Barakat highlighted the need for public awareness.

"We know that public health and awareness for a healthy lifestyle works. Therefore, ICLDC is planning on starting public health programmes in partnership with local health advocacy groups to organise emirate-wide activities to encourage prevention of diabetes," she said.

The ICLDC is currently researching the reason why diabetes occurs at such high levels in the country, which would help in planning further preventative measures.

The college has a specialised out-patient clinic where detection, prevention and treatment of diabetes takes place.



■ A sweet shop aims to become the country's biggest speciality shop for diabetics with its Belgian chocolates