

## Written evidence submitted by Dr Chris van Tulleken and Dr Dolly Theis (PHS0023)

### Topic proposal: Ultra-Processed Food (UPF)

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We propose that the Health and Social Care Select Committee explores Ultra-Processed Food (UPF) as part of its 'Prevention in health and social care' inquiry.

The need to prevent diet related disease couldn't be more urgent - it's the leading cause of early mortality and linked to more deaths globally than tobacco or any other health risk, fully causing 22% of all deaths <sup>1</sup>.

To tackle this, the UK Government has proposed almost 700 obesity policies in England over the last 30 years, and yet the prevalence of diet-related disease has increased and health inequalities have worsened in that time<sup>2</sup>.

UK dietary advice and policies continue to focus on reformulation – reducing fat, salt and sugar in the national diet; but a vast body of robust research has made it clear that the primary cause of diet related disease is not a diet high in fat, salt, sugar (HFSS) and low in fibre, but a diet high in products known as Ultra-Processed Foods, or UPF.

There's a formal scientific definition of UPF but, it can be boiled down to this: if a food is wrapped in plastic and has at least one ingredient that you wouldn't usually find in a standard home kitchen, it's UPF. Emulsifiers, stabilisers, sweeteners, humectants, flavours, colourings and many other additives are all UPF indicators.

Importantly, most UPF studies have controlled for sugar, salt, fat and fibre content and shown that it's the processing (thermal, mechanical, chemical) which is the problem, not the nutritional profile of foods. This explains why, for example, replacement of sugar with low calorie sweeteners doesn't lead to weight loss and may be associated with increased consumption and an increased risk of metabolic disease.

UPF now makes up 60% of the average diet in the UK and US. Many children get most of their calories from these substances <sup>3-5</sup>. Many UPF products are familiar as 'junk food', but there's plenty of organic, free-range, 'ethical' UPF which is sold as healthy, nutritious, environmentally friendly, or useful for weight loss. Almost every food marketed with a health claim is UPF. Almost all bread and breakfast cereals are UPF.

UPF is our national diet in the UK, especially for children.

UPF is engineered to drive excess consumption: many products have been through testing stages to assess how much a consumer will consume in a single sitting. Hundreds of epidemiological studies show UPF is strongly associated with significant health problems. Many studies focus on obesity <sup>3,6</sup>, but there's also evidence that increased UPF intake is strongly associated with an increased risk of:

Death – so called all-cause mortality <sup>7-11</sup>

Cardiovascular disease<sup>9,10,12</sup>

Cancers<sup>13</sup>

Type 2 diabetes <sup>14,15</sup>

High blood pressure <sup>16-18</sup>

Fatty liver disease <sup>19</sup>  
Inflammatory bowel disease<sup>20,21</sup>  
Depression <sup>22</sup>  
Worse blood fat profile <sup>23</sup>  
Frailty<sup>24,25</sup>  
Irritable bowel syndrome and dyspepsia<sup>23</sup>  
Dementia <sup>26</sup>

In addition to damaging health, UPF damages human societies by displacing food culture and driving inequality and poverty. It's the second leading cause of carbon emissions, and leading cause of plastic pollution and biodiversity loss <sup>27-29</sup>.

For many people, UPF is the only affordable, available food, so the policy implications are significant. Unlike many governments globally, the UK's dietary recommendations make no reference to UPF<sup>30</sup>. In 2010, a team from Brazil drew up the definition which is now accepted by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation<sup>31</sup> and integrated in national dietary guidelines of several countries including France, Brazil, Belgium, Brazil, Ecuador, Israel, Maldives, Peru and Uruguay<sup>32-34</sup>.

The Committee could explore several policies in this inquiry, which are well evidenced. To achieve them will require grassroots and political pressure, and legal action:

- **National Dietary Guidance:** include avoiding UPF products in the UK national dietary guidance.
- **Marketing restrictions:** introduce legislation to restrict marketing of UPF products and brands, especially around targeting of children.
- **Effective labelling of UPF products:** initially voluntary and then mandatory UPF labelling on packaging.
- **Institutional UPF limits:** reduction of UPF in government procurement, e.g., food in schools, prisons, the military, hospitals and government buildings.
- **Medical Education:** restrict the influence of the UPF industry on medical education and professional associations.

#### **High-profile UPF activities in 2023:**

- Dr Chris van Tulleken's book *Ultra-Processed People* (released 27<sup>th</sup> April)
- BBC film *Ultra-Processed people* (released Autumn)
- Series of three papers on UPF in a single November issue of The Lancet

There's an incredible opportunity here for the Committee to add value to the existing body of UPF research including bringing it to the Government's attention and amplifying the reach of the ground-breaking UPF Lancet series.

#### **Biographies**

##### **Dr Chris van Tulleken**

Chris van Tulleken is an NHS infectious diseases doctor at The Hospital for Tropical Diseases (UCLH) and an associate professor at UCL where his academic work focuses on conflicts of interest – especially in infant nutrition and infectious disease. He trained in medicine at Oxford and has a PhD in molecular virology from UCL.

He sits on the WHO expert group Professionals in Healthcare Against Sponsorship from the Formula Industry (PHASFI) and is an author on the upcoming Lancet series on ultra-processed foods and human health.

He is a BBC broadcaster, for children and adults, on television and radio. His series for children Operation Ouch on CBBC has won two BAFTAs.

### **Dr Dolly Theis |**

Dolly Theis is a Visiting Researcher at Cambridge University's MRC Epidemiology Unit where she completed her PhD examining UK government obesity policy. Alongside her research, Dolly runs her policy consultancy Dolitics, working primarily on facilitating health and food policy change.

Dolly co-founded 50:50 Parliament's cross-party #askhertostand campaign which helps women in the UK get selected and elected.

She's an ambassador of women military veterans charity Salute Her and ex-offenders employment charity Tempus Novo.

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