Call to ‘lock’ children in schools to fight obesity

By Toby McDonald

SCHOOL pupils should be ‘locked in’ at lunchtime to tackle Scotland’s obesity crisis.

Experts called for the drastic measure after a new report showed teenagers are gorging on fizzy drinks bought outside the school gates.

A study of 13 to 15-year-old pupils has shown 45 per cent of boys and 39 per cent of girls having a sugary, fizzy drink at lunchtime, including regular soft drinks and energy drinks.

As schools are not allowed to sell sugary drinks on the premises, pupils are buying them from local shops.

But the habit is putting them at risk of diabetes, tooth decay and weight gain.

Tam Fry, chairman of the National Obesity Forum, said secondary schools should close their gates at lunchtime and serve healthy, appetising food on the premises instead.

He said: ‘It would seem imperative that Scottish schools should operate a “locked in” policy at lunchtime and ensure that lunch is eaten in an environment where the meals provided can be controlled for sugar content.

‘It is no good moaning that children who bunk off to the nearest fast-food outlet are consuming sugar to excess until schools can guarantee that an alternative is delivered for them at school.’

In Scotland 28 per cent of children aged two to 15 are considered overweight or obese. The snapshot study of schools across the country, published in the journal Appetite, highlighted concerns about the rise in weight-related illnesses.

The authors, Dr Laura Kate Hamilton and Professor Wendy Wills, at the Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care, at the University of Hertfordshire, said the appetite for soft-drinks was putting children’s long term health at risk.

‘What is particularly noteworthy is the differences in the types of food and drink consumed at lunchtime by soft-drink consumers when compared to non-consumers,’ the report said.

‘A significantly larger proportion of soft-drink consumers consumed food that could be considered as “unhealthy” —
such as chips and sweets. This suggests that such consumers could be omitting key nutrients that are not present in sugar-sweetened beverages because they are either deciding not to consume alternatives or do not have the availability of more nutritious options, supporting previous conclusions that soft drinks have a negative impact on the quality of young people’s diets.

In the study 535 pupils, from seven secondary schools across Scotland, were asked to complete a questionnaire about their daily eating habits. More than a quarter of pupils had not eaten any food at lunchtime on the day of the survey. Nearly twice as many children said they had eaten outside school as those using the canteen during the past week. The study concluded:

‘This is a public health concern given the associations between sugar consumption and type-2 diabetes.

‘The amount of sugar and the frequency of soft-drink consumption is associated with dental caries in children.

‘Banning products or reducing the number of retailers in proximity to the school is unlikely to be successful.

‘Schools should not only provide healthier options in the canteen alongside a more desirable social environment, but they should also include young people in these decisions.

‘It’s imperative we not only find new ways to encourage them to make better choices, but also ensure that the healthier options are available.’

Next year a sugar tax will be introduced in the UK for fizzy drinks manufacturers.

Dr Ian Campbell, medical director of the charity Weight Concern, said: ‘The proposed sugar tax is likely to decrease average daily intake by around six calories a day, not enough to make any significant impact.’