Improving nutrition in Romania

Officials in Romania have pledged to provide vitamin pills to all school attendees, prompted by a survey showing that Romanian children are much shorter than their European counterparts. But, reports Carmiela Ionescu, doctors worry the policy may cause more problems than it solves.

8-year-old Clarisa Anastase knows all about taking food or sweets from strangers. Pausing during playtime at her Bucharest school, she explains her mother teaches her to be polite, but always say no, regardless of how tasty whatever is offered may look.

As a result, she has very strong views on the vitamin tablets she is expected to take from next year: “I shall take them home and ask my mother, and if she says I am allowed to then I will—otherwise I shall say no.”

Clarisa is not alone in her scepticism of the new government-backed scheme to improve the health of Romanian children. Teachers and medical professionals have raised similar objections to the planned forced addition of a government-prescribed dose of vitamins to school dinners next year.

Officials in Romania, who have so far ignored criticisms, are meanwhile pressing ahead with plans to give children up to the age of 11 free vitamins.

It follows on from a scheme 2 years ago when school children began receiving free milk and a croissant at lunchtime after the government decided children were not getting enough calcium in their diets.

The Social Affairs Ministry, which is behind the new health initiative, says a widening of the scheme to provide pupils with vital nutrients is necessary after studies showed that many Romanian children have more problems with their health and development than is normal in industrialised countries. Recent studies have also shown that 25% of the country’s 22 million inhabitants are living in poverty.

Nutritionists and doctors, however, have raised serious questions about the government’s plans, warning they may do more harm than good.

“Forcing children to take vitamins is a gross mistake”, says nutritionist Simona Tivadar from Bucharest University Hospital. “The greatest risk of administering multivitamins to children who do not really need them is that it increases their appetite and this can lead to obesity, which can cause a multitude of very serious health problems.”

“For instance, an obese person is four times at risk of getting cancer than a person with normal weight, 50% of obese people get diabetes, and absence from work among obese people is much higher than among people with normal weight. Vitamins can make children obese in the long term.”

“Abusing any of the vitamins contained in multivitamins also has other effects on the body. For example, large doses of vitamin A can cause sight problems and too much vitamin D takes the calcium out of bones.”

She added that vitamin supplements should only be given to those who really need them.

“Children get vitamins from the food they eat. In Romania, there are many sedentary children so their vitamin needs are lower. Vitamin supplements should be given to those children who do a lot of sports, difficult physical work or have serious alimentary deficiencies”, Tivadar says.

“Before any vitamins are given a paediatrician needs to make a general health evaluation of any child and a serious social enquiry about his or her family. In my opinion the whole programme needs re-evaluating, you cannot give the same set of vitamins to the entire country”, she adds.

Until 1989, Romanians lived under a brutal communist regime led by dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and the country’s economy was driven to virtual collapse. It has struggled to transform to a western capitalist economy and the country remains one of the poorest in Europe with the average monthly wage barely reaching £100 (US$185).

Many Romanians outside larger cities such as Bucharest farm small plots of land for food. In more rural areas many people live off an almost exclusive diet of what they can grow in their gardens or on any land they have
and in winter some people’s diets consist almost exclusively of cabbage, potatoes and beans.

This has affected children especially, the government believes. A survey it commissioned 2 years ago showed that Romanian children aged between 2 and 5 years were 21% shorter than children of the same age in what were then the 15 states of the European Union and that newborn babies in Romania weighed 300 grams less than newborns in the EU.

Marta Nora Tarnea, state secretary for family policies and social assistance, defended the scheme, saying: “Children in Romania have growth and health problems because they do not receive the right food for their age. We are not doing anything that hasn’t been done before. After World War II all children received a spoon of fish oil, which is rich in vitamin D, to fight off rickets. Today they will receive multivitamins instead.”

Doctors, though, believe that the government would be better off concentrating on improving children’s awareness of nutritional issues.

“The importance of eating healthily should be taught from an early age, especially nowadays when stores are bombarded with obscure food products that nobody knows anything about”, says Tivadar.

“This government programme appears similar to what the communists did when they took over in Romania almost 60 years ago. My mother’s family had about ten cows and milk and cheese was their main food. Yet the communists made sure they got powdered milk, which certainly wasn’t necessary. For many families it will be the same with the vitamins.”

Teachers in some areas are also against the plans. Bianca Popescu is a teacher at a primary school in Bucharest’s sixth district. The area is one of the wealthier in the city and she says the children she sees in her classes every day do not need any vitamin supplements.

“They come from organised families who have proper financial means to support their kids”, she says.

Popescu believes the government would be better off running a scheme in which only children with health problems or those at risk of developing them from a poor diet should be given supplements.

“Maybe a distinction should be made between families who have certain opportunities and families who have difficulties raising their children. I am sure the government is aware that nobody can force these children to take those vitamins. It’s their parents’ choice. I am afraid that what is a well-intended project could actually prove to be just a waste of time.”

Some people though are convinced the scheme will benefit children. Teachers in poor areas where families struggle to provide their children with balanced meals support the idea.

Camelia Balan is a primary school teacher in a school in a poor district on the outskirts of Bucharest.

She teaches children between the ages of 7 and 9 years and says that some of those she teaches obviously have a poor diet.

“For most of the kids in my classroom receiving free vitamins would be a good thing. You can see that their parents cannot afford to feed them properly. They cannot provide them with enough vegetables and fruits and they can rarely give them meat. This becomes particularly difficult in winter when they cannot grow their own vegetables anymore in their gardens”, she says.

“Sometimes, the pupils’ parents cannot even give them anything to eat during their lunch break. So, they only have the croissant and glass of milk the government supplies them with.”

Tivadar believes that if the scheme is enforced by the government teachers like Ms Balan should have a say in which children receive the vitamins.

“After the parents, teachers know the children best. They see which are underfed or have bad diets and should identify which children may need vitamins and then after that a paediatrician should take over and make a detailed health assessment of the child and see what his or her body lacks”, she said, adding: “And the government knows where the poor areas are. They should start there.”

But at the Budimex Children’s Hospital in Bucharest, Florea Lordachescu remains unhappy with the government’s plan in any form. “The medical books are quite clear. A child needs vitamin D every day until he or she is 18 months old and after that only for few months a year until they are 7. After the age of 7 only children with serious health issues need extra vitamins. For the rest, the recommendation is quite clear: food, not pills.”

Carmiota Ionescu