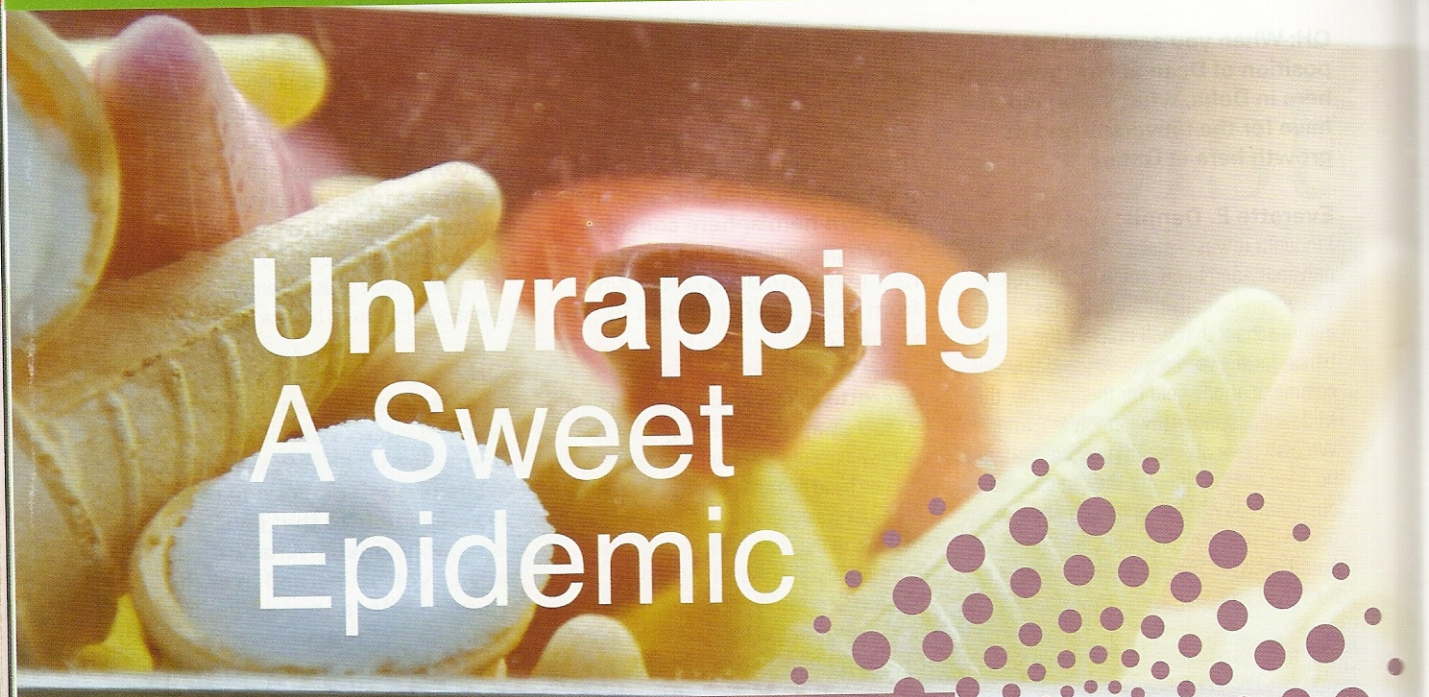
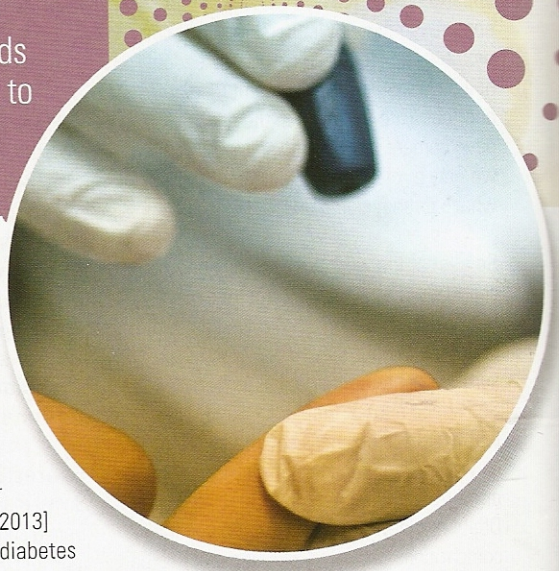


Unwrapping A Sweet Epidemic

By Ashlee Starratt
Photos courtesy of Muneera Al-Buainain and Caitlin Sewell

A new student-driven community website sheds light on the diabetes crisis in Qatar. QH talked to one of its creators to find out more about the human face of this life-changing disease.



It's a disease that is both debilitating and in some cases preventable; but once you have it, it has you for life. Qatar has the highest rates of obesity and obesity-related diabetes in the Gulf region with a staggering 75 percent of Qataris who are overweight and a further 40 percent who fall into the morbidly obese category.

These are statistics gathered from the National Health Strategy and compiled on a new website called Sweet Epidemic, a project spear-headed by fourth-year journalism students from the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University here in Doha. Using every medium available to them to spread the message about what is truly an epidemic in this country the website incorporates social media, photography, audio-visual and print to educate the public in an effort to reverse this alarming trend.

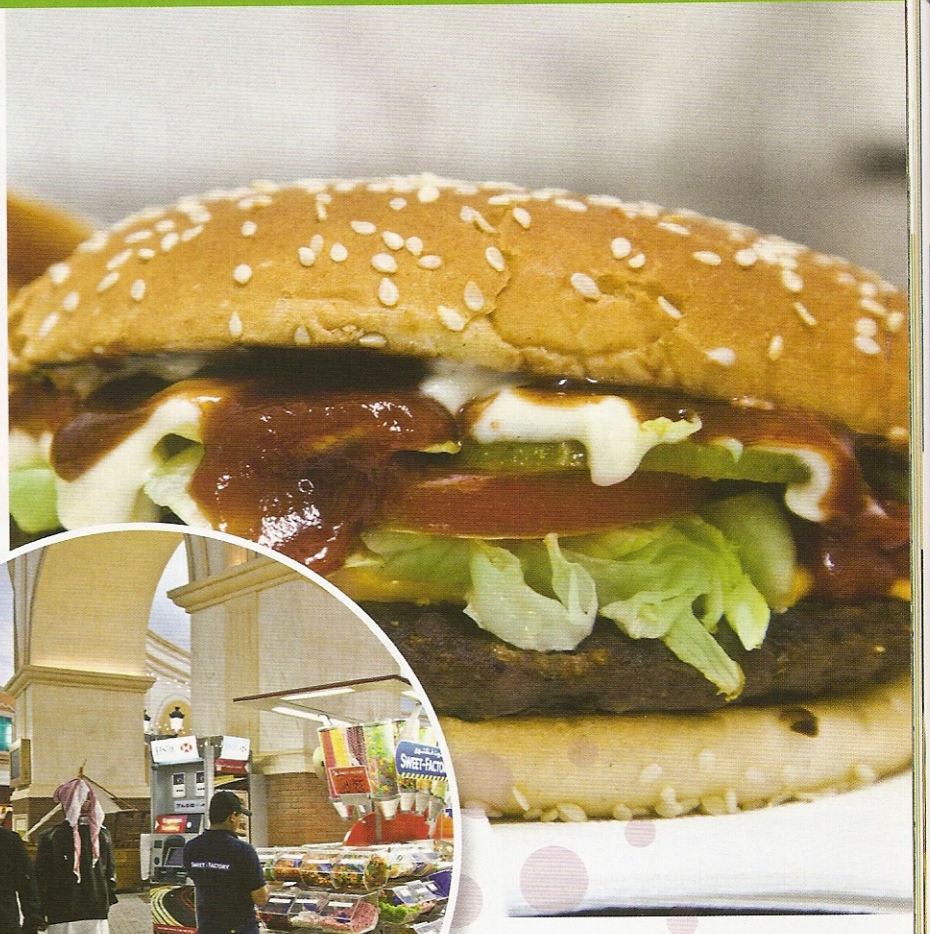
"Diabetes is non-communicable disease that is very prevalent among people in Qatari society," says journalism student Muneera Al-Buainain. "Not many people are aware of the fact that diabetes can put a person's life at risk. So, what Northwestern University in Qatar did was they asked the [class of 2013] journalism students to report on diabetes and obesity in Qatar by devoting an intensive five-week course collecting data and information, interviewing doctors, parents and patients with diabetes and those who are obese to allow them to share their stories with us. It was our job as journalists to deliver their messages to the world. "

There are two variations of diabetes that can afflict the population; Type 1 is an autoimmune form of the disease and those who live with it have usually developed it at a young age or before they turn 25. That is why it is also known as juvenile diabetes. In this form of the disease, insulin, a hormone produced within the pancreas, isn't manufactured in enough supply for the body to break down blood glucose (or sugar) into energy cells that help fuel us.

People with Type 1 diabetes can pass the deficiency down through their families as the result of genetics and are insulin-dependent for the rest of their lives, injecting themselves several times a day. Normal blood sugar levels

should be between 70 and 140 milligrams per decilitre according to information gathered on the Sweet Epidemic website. Muneera says she was shocked to learn that 27-30% of children in Qatar suffer from Type 1 diabetes.

"My partner, Caitlin Sewell, and I were focusing on diabetes among Qatari children and we were amazed at the fact that even infants can be born with diabetes as well," she says. "We interviewed a Qatari woman at Hamad Hospital in the pediatric endocrinology clinic and her four-year old daughter was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when she was a year and a half old. The girl was so brave and calm when her mother injected her with the insulin treatment. The mother said, 'Oh, she's used to it, we've been doing it for three years.'"



Of the percentage of children in the country suffering from Type 1 official figures indicate that 120 of them take daily insulin injections while another 100 are hooked up to an insulin pump that provides a constant dosage of the hormone into the bloodstream, Muneera tells QH.

Type 2 diabetes is the most common form of the disease and also the most preventable. It's estimated that 90% of people newly diagnosed will have this adult-onset variation resulting directly from obesity, sedentary lifestyles and a diet high in sugar and carbohydrate. In this case insulin production levels in the body decrease or the cells become resistant to the hormone due to the amount of sugar consumed. The onset of Type 2 diabetes is gradual and can be prevented through healthy lifestyle changes that include diet and regular exercise.

Muneera says the public response to the information and stories on the website has been encouraging. "I think that more and more people are visiting the site as [other] newspapers and some websites have been reporting on it to tell the world about our project," she says. "The website is mainly focused on diabetes and obesity in Qatar and as a Qatari national, most of us have family members or friends who have diabetes and I think it's a great access for people in Qatar to visit the site since it's dedicated to a particular disease that is very prevalent in the country. [People] can learn more about it and see how to help themselves and the people around them to cope with the disease or even prevent themselves from getting it."

With 3,000 unique user hits to date that number will keep rising as word spreads to stop the spread, so to speak. When asked what has been the most rewarding part of the Sweet Epidemic journey, Muneera is quick to respond with accolades for her teammates.

"The entire class worked on the project as a team," she says. "We were divided into groups so we had website producers, data and graphics producers, writers, photographers, video producers and our professor Christina Paschyn was our editor. The most rewarding part of our project was witnessing the day of its launch. It made me feel so happy and honoured to be part of the Sweet Epidemic team for accomplishing such a great website on a disease that affects many people in my community and we hope that through our website we can make a change."

If you or some you know are affected by diabetes visit www.qatarsweetepidemic.org for a wealth of home-grown stories, statistics and information to educate yourself about the many faces of a disease that's slowly robbing Qataris of their health and quality of life. Through skilled research, documentation and awareness, the Sweet Epidemic website is a strong catalyst towards changing that trend – a step in the right direction that really is sweet. ●