Sugar kills. So what are we going to do about it?

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For a month now a science experiment has been taking place on my kitchen bench.

The time for talk is over. It’s time to tackle the taxing issue of sugar with, well, a sugar tax. (Illustration: Jonathan Bentley)

The teenager has submerged eggshells in large plastic cups filled with a selection of drinks: Coke, Fanta, Sprite, Mountain Dew, Creaming Soda and water. Apparently the deterioration of eggshells indicates how the sugar and acid in soft drinks impacts on our teeth. I’d like to say I’ve been fascinated but mostly I’ve been harrumphy every time Little Miss Einstein warns me not to peel vegetables or sizzle steak or actually use my own kitchen lest I contaminate her precious investigation.

Fortunately this week the results had to be submitted to the New Scientist — or likely just her teacher — so the festering mess was finally cleared away. Not, however, before I’d happily noted that the septic-looking “Coke egg” supported my long held and oft-challenged ban on the evil brown stuff.

But as my daughter revealed the results it became clear this was no laughing matter. The eggshell in the Fanta had lost a staggering 15.4 per cent of its total mass. The Coke egg was the next worse with a mass loss of 11.5 per cent while the innocuous-looking Sprite was down 11.4 per cent. And this was just teeth? What does the poison do to our arteries and guts?

Plenty it seems, which is why Mexico and, last month, the UK introduced a sugar tax on soft drinks. “Pull your finger out, Australia,” celebrity chef Jamie Oliver urged in the wake of the new levy which will be introduced in 2018, giving manufacturers time to reduce the sugar content in their drinks.

So what have our politicians done? Nothing.

We’re the nation content to waddle along after the rest of the world despite new research on global obesity published in The Lancet this week showing that 37 per cent of Australian women and 37.8 per cent of Australian men will be obese by 2025.

We’re the nation that allows Coca-Cola to fund research that shifts the focus of obesity towards exercise and away from diet.

And we’re the nation content to ignore figures that reveal eight in 10 Australians would support a tax on sugary drinks if the revenue — over $250 million a year — was spent tackling childhood obesity. Ours needs to be a country that follows rather than leads as we’ve previously done with firearms and tobacco. Our kids’ health is suffering, our diabetes rates are soaring and our productivity is endangered. And yet our leaders continue to push the politics of re-election and not the politics of legacy.

It’s about personal responsibility, they say. People need to exercise self control. And then they throw in the words “nanny state” knowing it’ll trigger a talkback rage fest and deflect from the issue at hand.
The truth is we should be tackling obesity the same way we dealt with guns and tobacco, leading the world with policy that’s swift, smart and effective. Like guns and smoking, sugar kills. Yet we’re content to live off the laurels of a 20-year-old firearm buyback scheme while at the same time allow our kids to slurp down 600ml bottles soft drink loaded with a staggering 16 teaspoons of sugar.
Well Britain isn’t. Treasurer George Osborne, introducing the tax, verbalised what our government fails to grasp — that government is there to guide and legislation is there to lead.
“I am not prepared to look back at my time here in this parliament, doing this job and say to my children’s generation: I’m sorry, we knew there was a problem with sugared drinks, we knew it caused disease but we ducked the difficult decisions and we did nothing,” he said.

Further, he acknowledged that leadership is a privilege which comes with a commitment to responding not just to what’s happening now but what’s likely to happen next. “You cannot have a long term plan for the country unless you have a long term plan for our children’s healthcare,” he said.

By contrast, Scott Morrison and Malcolm Turnbull have been remarkably quiet.

But it’s a no brainer. As they grapple with a budget that’s suffering its own obesity crisis why not bring in a tax that improves not only waistlines but the bottom line? What’s more, there’ll be savings on future health spending. A sugar tax is not just a deterrent but a simple signpost to what’s good and bad. It’s certainly worked in Mexico where a 10 per cent levy on fizzy drinks has cut sales by 12 per cent.

As for the argument that a sugar tax penalises low income families, then drink tap water. Going back to my daughter’s science experiment, can you guess how much mass the egg submerged in water lost?
None.