



Submission to the “Select Committee into the obesity epidemic in Australia” consultation

Prepared by

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Introductory remarks

Thank you for this opportunity to make a submission to the “Select Committee into the obesity epidemic in Australia” consultation.

The Western Australian Cancer Prevention Research Unit (WACPRU), based at Curtin University, aims to inform policy and practice relating to encouraging healthy lifestyle behaviours. Nutrition is a primary area of focus, and we have undertaken an extensive program of work examining various aspects of food policy design and implementation. Given WACPRU’s areas of expertise, this submission relates only to the following two topic areas of interest to the Committee:

- The effectiveness of existing policies and programs introduced by Australian governments to improve diets and prevent childhood obesity.
- The role of the food industry in contributing to poor diets and childhood obesity in Australia.

Overall, WACPRU endorses the Obesity Policy Coalition’s 8 evidence-based “Tipping the Scales” recommendations (<http://www.opc.org.au/what-we-do/tipping-the-scales>):

1. Toughen restrictions on junk food advertising
2. Set food reformulation targets
3. Make Health Star Ratings mandatory
4. Develop an active transport strategy
5. Fund public health education campaigns
6. Add a 20% health levy to sugary drinks
7. Establish a national obesity taskforce
8. Monitor diet, physical activity, and weight guidelines

The effectiveness of existing policies and programs introduced by Australian governments to improve diets and prevent childhood obesity

WACPRU has conducted exploratory and evaluation research for the Health Star Rating food labelling system, the WA Healthy Food and Drink Policy (implemented in government schools), the Crunch&Sip program (implemented in more than 300 WA primary schools), and the FOODcents adult nutrition education program. The results of these research programs illustrate that population-based efforts to improve nutrition literacy and facilitate healthier food consumption behaviours can be effective when based on evidence and appropriately developed and implemented. Details of the results for each program are outlined below.

Health Star Rating System

Our large-scale, population-wide studies have provided peer-reviewed evidence that:

1. The Health Star Rating system improves food choices by helping consumers to quickly and correctly identify healthier choices.
2. The Health Star Rating system can overcome any negative effects of misleading health claims on packaged foods.
3. The Health Star Rating system is more effective in influencing food choices than the Daily Intake Guide and Traffic Light food labelling systems.
4. Australian consumers prefer the Health Star Rating system to other labelling systems.

These results reinforce the importance of making the Health Star Rating available on as many foods as possible to facilitate healthier food choices at a population level. This will be best achieved if the system is made mandatory.

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Western Australian Healthy Food and Drink Policy

The mandatory WA Healthy Food and Drink Policy was introduced in WA government schools just over 11 years ago. WACPRU staff performed the initial evaluation that was conducted around 18 months after introduction and the follow-up evaluations that were conducted 10 and 11 years later. These evaluations demonstrate that:

1. Support for the policy at both the time of introduction and 10 years later was strong among key stakeholder groups (principals, teachers, canteen managers, and Parents & Citizen Committee representatives).
2. These stakeholder groups report that the quality and healthiness of foods provided in schools have improved since the introduction of the policy.
3. There are high levels of compliance with the policy.
4. A majority of stakeholders would like to see the policy strengthened further in the future.

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Crunch&Sip

The Crunch&Sip program is run by Cancer Council WA and funded by the WA Health Promotion Foundation (Healthway). The program involves primary school children being encouraged to consume fruit, vegetables, and water during class time. Given consumption data showing that Australian children now meet fruit intake guidelines but remain highly deficient in vegetable intake, the Crunch&Sip program was recently modified to include a stronger emphasis on vegetables. Our formative (to assist program modification) and evaluation (to assess program effectiveness) research indicates strong program support from key stakeholders and that increases have been achieved in children's consumption of vegetables.

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FOODcents adult nutrition education program

The FOODcents program operated in Western Australia for more than 25 years. It was funded by the WA Department of Health and delivered by Cancer Council WA, Foodbank WA, and the Australian Red Cross. WACPRU and Cancer Council WA conducted a series of studies to assess the efficacy of the program in terms of increasing nutrition literacy and improving food consumption behaviours, especially among more disadvantaged consumers. The program produced significant improvements in nutrition-related beliefs and behaviours in both the short- and longer-term (2-4 years post attendance). In particular, participants demonstrated lasting increases in the consumption of vegetables, legumes, and wholegrain products and a decrease in the consumption of soft drinks. A lasting increase in the use of the nutrition information available on food packages was also observed. International economic analyses of similar programs indicate they are highly cost-effective.

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The role of the food industry in contributing to poor diets and childhood obesity in Australia

There is ubiquitous promotion of junk food in Australia, much of which is seen by children. Our research has provided evidence that the current self-regulatory system fails to protect children from being exposed to large quantities of advertising for unhealthy foods. A substantial and growing evidence base shows that this exposure results in higher levels of junk food preference and consumption among both children and adults. In addition, our data show that exposure to junk food advertising causes children to repeatedly request unhealthy foods from their parents, which in turn results in higher levels of provision. These results highlight the need for more effective food advertising regulation in Australia.

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Conclusion

The national and state-based nutrition-related programs profiled above have been found to be effective in improving food environments and food choices. The existing evidence supports the efficacy of these approaches and provides a rationale for further investment in these forms of nutrition intervention in the future. Similarly, the evidence relating to the lack of efficacy of food advertising regulation is strong, which should prompt the proactive and timely development of more effective regulation.

We remain at your disposal to provide further information on any of the programs or studies cited.



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