

28 April 2008

Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing  
House of Representatives  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Submission No. 3  
(Inq into Obesity)

JE 14/05/08

Dear Secretary

## Inquiry into Obesity in Australia

Research Australia is pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

Obesity is an increasing problem for Australian society with 41 per cent of the population classified as overweight and a further 27 per cent obese<sup>1</sup>. This is of concern due to the associated increase in the risk of Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and other chronic illnesses. The health care and productivity costs of this emerging problem are substantial. Access Economics has calculated the total cost to Australia of obesity in 2005 was \$3.8 billion<sup>2</sup>. Workforce productivity costs from obesity in 2005 were \$1.7 billion, including \$442 million from Type 2 diabetes and \$472 million from cardiovascular disease. These costs include absenteeism, premature death and lower employment rates.

Public awareness of the problem is high, with significant media coverage and a range of government awareness campaigns in recent years. Yet the problem of obesity does not appear to be diminishing.

The general public is well aware of the importance of healthy eating and exercise. Public opinion polling by Research Australia in 2007<sup>3</sup> found that 80 per cent of Australians believe that exercise and eating less junk food are important for dealing with obesity. However, 80 per cent of Australians believe that they have a balanced and healthy diet, a figure challenged by the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity. This misperception may be hampering efforts to combat weight gain and promote healthy lifestyle in the population.

Obesity is also closely related to environmental factors. The sedentary nature of many modern jobs and our reliance on cars for transport have greatly reduced physical activity. Research Australia's report *Healthy Planet, Places and People*<sup>4</sup> identified community design and lack of access to walking, cycling and public transport options as influences on physical activity and obesity. Studies of population obesity are beginning to identify urban environments as "obesogenic" and are arguing that efforts to increase exercise are being counteracted by dependence on motor transport and a lack of opportunities for incidental exercise.

To address obesity effectively, policy makers should take a broad multi-sector approach. A recent study by the Australian Public Service Commission<sup>5</sup> noted that complex problems such as obesity must be treated as a whole system, as changing just one component may

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have unintended consequences. Obesity itself is a multifactorial condition, influenced by genetic, dietary, environmental, social and psychological drivers.

Research Australia considers that more work needs to be done on translating our understanding of the causes and drivers of obesity into better and healthier lifestyles. This will involve a greater understanding of behavioural change and the most effective strategies. It will take better community education to address misconceptions about diet and lifestyle.

Key research questions related to obesity are:

- What is the current and projected incidence of obesity and other lifestyle related conditions in Australia?
- How effective have government and community obesity programs been to date?
- What new interventions should be developed for the prevention of early onset of diabetes and related conditions, including public education, and regulatory measures?
- What impact will non-health interventions (e.g. built environment, food production and marketing, transport) have in reducing obesity?

Addressing obesity will require a commitment from governments to consider issues of urban design, transportation, work-life balance and the possible use of incentives and deterrents to encourage exercise and healthy eating. Appropriate use of legislation and regulation in areas such as promotion and sale of junk food should be informed by evidence, community attitudes and sound public policy.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input to this inquiry.

Yours sincerely



Rebecca James  
Chief Executive Officer

## ATTACHMENTS – Results of Research Australia polling – Healthy Planet, Places and People

<sup>1</sup> International Diabetes Institute. 2005. *Ausdiab 2005 – The Australian Diabetes, Obesity and Lifestyle Study*, [http://www.diabetes.com.au/pdf/AUSDiab\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](http://www.diabetes.com.au/pdf/AUSDiab_Report_Final.pdf), accessed 26/03/08

<sup>2</sup> Access Economics. 2006. *The Economic Costs of Obesity*, <http://www.accesseconomics.com.au/publicationsreports/showreport.php?id=102>, accessed 26/03/08

<sup>3</sup> Research Australia. 2007. *Health & Medical Research Public Opinion Poll 2007*, [http://researchaustralia-org.web5.pbstaging.com/content/documents/e\\_OpinionPoll2007.pdf](http://researchaustralia-org.web5.pbstaging.com/content/documents/e_OpinionPoll2007.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Research Australia. 2007. *Healthy Planet, Places and People*, [http://researchaustralia-org.web5.pbstaging.com/content/documents/web\\_EnviroReportRA.pdf](http://researchaustralia-org.web5.pbstaging.com/content/documents/web_EnviroReportRA.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Australian Public Service Commission. 2007. *Tackling Wicked Problems – A Public Policy Perspective*, <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications07/wickedproblems.htm>