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Submission No. 28  
(Inq into Obesity)

*21105108*

## ACT Health SUBMISSION

Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Obesity in Australia

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing

30 April 2008

### Terms of Reference

The Committee will inquire into and report on the increasing prevalence of obesity in the Australian population, focusing on future implications for Australia's health system. The committee will recommend what governments, industry, individuals and the broader community can do to prevent and manage the obesity epidemic in children, youth and adults.

ACT Health offers the following submission to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Obesity in Australia in relation to the extent of obesity in the ACT and existing intervention and prevention initiatives.

## Obesity in the ACT

The increasing prevalence of excess weight (overweight and obesity) and chronic diseases related to obesity has emerged in recent years as an important public health issue. Recent ACT surveys are showing concerning results.

- The results of the 2005 ACT General Health Survey provide the most recent information on overweight and obesity in ACT adults. The results show that about one in five adults in the ACT were obese and a third were overweight. Results also show that males were significantly more likely to be overweight than females.
- Of concern are results from the 2005 ACT Secondary Student Alcohol and Drug Survey (ASSAD) that indicate through a self-report method that 14.0% of secondary students (12-17 years) have a Body Mass Index in the overweight range and 8.2% in the obese range.
- Furthermore, results from the 2006 ACT Year 6 Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey conducted throughout ACT primary schools show that more than one in four children (25.8%) in ACT Year 6 classes are overweight or obese with this tendency being greater in boys (29.1%) than girls (22.8%).
- Obesity is also becoming apparent in early childhood. Data collected in relation to height and weight indicate that in 2004, 16.7% of kindergarten children were overweight (12.5%) or obese (4.2%) with girls (17.8%) more likely to be overweight or obese than boys (15.7%).

The increasing incidence of adult and childhood obesity and chronic diseases related to obesity is a major and growing problem that deserves national priority action and a cross government multisectoral approach.

ACT Health supports the development of the *National Preventative Health Care Strategy* and the Australian Better Health Initiative and the inclusion of obesity as a national health priority.

### Surveillance and monitoring

Effective surveillance and monitoring systems are an essential component of any strategic approach to curbing the obesity epidemic. Reliable information both locally and nationally is essential for evidence-based intervention, monitoring and evaluation of public policy aimed toward prevention, detection and treatment of obesity.

Coordination of jurisdictional surveillance systems nationally is essential to ensure that comparable information is available to monitor national programs and interventions. Similarly, national surveillance initiatives should ensure that information is available at State and Territory level.

To meet these information needs, ACT Health has in place several surveillance initiatives that collect data at regular intervals on the prevalence and trends in overweight and obesity in the ACT population. These initiatives include: the ACT General Health Survey (ACT GHS); the ACT Secondary Student Alcohol and Drug (ASSAD) survey; the ACT Year 6 Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (ACTPANS), and; the ACT Kindergarten Screening Program.

- *ACT General Health Survey*

The results of the 2005 ACT General Health Survey provide the most recent information on overweight and obesity in ACT adults. The results show that about one in five adults in the ACT were obese and a third were overweight. Results also show that males were significantly more likely to be overweight than females and overweight increased significantly with increasing age.

- *ACT Secondary Student Alcohol and Drug Survey (ASSAD)*

In 2005 the ASSAD survey was modified by ACT Health to collect height and weight information. The results of the 2005 ASSAD survey indicate through a self-report method that 14.0% of secondary students (12-17 years) have a BMI in the overweight range and 8.2% in the obese range.

The survey has been modified to collect information on weight management practices and attitudes of ACT secondary students in the 2008 survey round.

- *ACT Year 6 Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey (ACTPANS)*

In order to gain a clearer picture of childhood overweight and obesity and associated characteristics in primary school children, ACT Health developed and administered the 2006 ACT Year 6 Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey throughout ACT primary schools. This survey collected for the first time self-reported information on a range of healthy weight priority areas including, weight status, participation in physical activity, eating patterns and environments, attitudes and psychosocial outcomes.

Results from the survey show that more than one in four children (25.8%) in ACT Year 6 classes are overweight or obese with this tendency being greater in boys (29.1%) than girls (22.8%).

Consumption of energy dense foods and sugary soft-drinks feature prominently in many children's diets with boys more likely to consume these foods than girls. On a positive note the frequency of fruit and vegetable consumption is also high.

One in five (19%) children were found to be physically active at levels that meet the Australian guidelines and only one-third either walked or rode their bike to school everyday. However, two-thirds of all children were found to watch television or use the computer for no more than two hours a day.

- *ACT Kindergarten Screening Program data*

The ACT Kindergarten Screening Program is conducted throughout ACT primary schools each year. The program provides health screening to all children in ACT kindergartens, including height and weight assessments.

Data collected in relation to height and weight indicate that in 2004, 16.7% of kindergarten children were overweight (12.5%) or obese (4.2%) with girls (17.8%) more likely to be overweight or obese than boys (15.7%). Trends indicate that between 2001 and 2004 the rates of overweight and obesity in ACT kindergarten children remained stable.

## **Prevention initiatives**

There are many factors that contribute to the increase in overweight and obesity. Effective management will require a whole of community and government approach. This should involve health and education professionals, governments, food industry, transport industry and communities working together.

To date, most public health interventions to increase levels of physical activity, such as media campaigns, have focused on individual behavioural change. At best these result in increased levels of activity in only a small proportion of the population, and may not be sustained long-term. Modification of environmental factors may yield greater population health dividends than individual lifestyle approaches, and may be necessary before individual lifestyle approaches can be effective.

The escalating costs of the health care sector are in part contributed to by chronic diseases as a result of overweight and obesity, making investment in prevention of the obesity epidemic a more sustainable option for the future.

## **ACT Health obesity prevention initiatives**

ACT Health undertakes a range of initiatives targeting sub optimal physical activity and poor diet using a number of approaches including raising awareness in persons at risk, and facilitation of early intervention and management of those diagnosed with chronic disease. These include;

- *Social marketing campaigns:*
  - Go for 2&5® campaign aims to increase fruit and vegetable consumption.

- Find 30. It's not a big exercise® campaign aims to increase physical activity in adults in the ACT.
- *Health promotion grants.*
  - Health Promoting Schools Funding Round, which provides funding to schools and early childhood centres to facilitate targeted health promotion projects with an emphasis on physical activity and nutrition.
  - Community Funding Round which has the promotion of physical activity and nutrition as a priority area.
  - Health Promotion Sponsorships Funding Round which uses physical activity and nutrition as key health promotion sponsorship messages.
- *Health messages in school settings.* These include:
  - Nourish the Facts, ACT schools guidelines developed by ACT Health in conjunction with the ACT Department for Education and Training. The guidelines support staff working within the ACT school communities to follow best practice in food and nutrition.
  - ACT Travelsmart Walking School Bus Project which aims to encourage primary school aged children to walk to school with the support of parent volunteers.
  - Working in partnership with the ACT Department of Education and Training to improve nutrition in school canteens via the development of an accredited canteen managers training course and revision of the canteen accreditation system.
- *Early Childhood Active Play and Eating Well Project.* This is a 3-year multi-strategy project in partnership with ACT Sport and Recreation Services and the Heart Foundation ACT. The project aims to create supportive environments in ACT Early Childhood services to promote breastfeeding, active play and healthy eating to families of children aged birth to 5 years in the ACT.
- Development of *Be Active ACT*, a health position statement on the health benefits of physical activity.
- *Capacity building for health promotion professionals:*
  - ACT Health provides ongoing seminars and training for health and community workers in health promotion and obesity prevention and information provision through websites such as the ACT Health Promotion Website.
- *Community Health Programs:*
  - Maternal and Child Health nurses provide best practice advice to new parents regarding nutrition.
  - Family Weight Management Program – Talk about Weight. A family weight management program to support families with overweight children to make lifestyle changes.
  - ACT Health produces and distributes 'Tuckatalk', a newsletter for families of primary and preschools aged children focusing on healthy eating and physical activity.

ACT Health is now focusing on initiatives to prevent chronic diseases and improve management of chronic diseases particularly in relation to physical activity and nutrition including raising awareness in persons at risk, and facilitation of early intervention and management of those diagnosed with chronic disease.

## **Research**

Improving national policy on obesity depends on robust research that examines fundamental obesity mechanisms using multi-disciplinary research techniques. It is critical that this research be disseminated to policy makers to guide evidence based practice. This is particularly vital for smaller jurisdictions with limited research capacity.

ACT Health has been a partner in an inter-disciplinary multi-sectoral collaborative research consortium concerned with seeking to understand the causes of population obesity, and

investigating potential solutions. The research consortium involves members from the ANU, CSIRO, University of Canberra, University of NSW and ACT Government.

### **Key issues**

ACT Health recommends the following key issues to be considered by the Committee.

- Obesity is targeted as a national priority.
- Jurisdictional surveillance systems are coordinated and standardised nationally.
- Best practice guidelines highlighting successful intervention and prevention strategies are developed.
- Develop a whole of government nationally coordinated approach to obesity prevention in Australia.



## Chief Executive

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Mr Steve Georganas MP (Chairman)  
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mr Georganas

Thank you for your invitation to provide a submission to the Commonwealth Parliamentary inquiry into Obesity in Australia.

I have attached a response from ACT Health addressing the terms of reference provided by the Standing Committee. If you have any queries regarding this submission please do not hesitate to contact Linda Halliday ([Linda.Halliday@act.gov.au](mailto:Linda.Halliday@act.gov.au)) phone 02 62074036.

Yours sincerely

Mark Cormack  
Chief Executive

16 May 2008