

**House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Health & Ageing**

Inquiry into obesity in Australia

September 2008

Submission from: Tai Chi Productions

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

Dear Sir/Madam

Tai Chi Productions submission: Inquiry into Obesity in Australia

We are committed to working closely with government and other relevant stakeholders to extend the existing 'train the trainer' tai chi for health program into regional and remote communities of Australia. These evidence based programs are a preventative and therapeutic way to address obesity and the associated chronic health conditions in Australia.

If you wish to discuss these matters or make further inquiries please contact Rani Hughes, program developer on Ph 0409 164 396.

Yours sincerely



Paul Lam
Company Director

Summary

This submission describes the preventative and therapeutic way in which evidence based modified Tai Chi programs can assist in addressing the obesity crisis in Australia. It proposes the extension of an existing 'train the trainer' program to enable regional and remote health and fitness professionals to deliver Tai Chi classes. Funding is necessary for this to be carried out.

Obesity and associated health conditions

Obesity has a significant impact upon the health and well being of Australians. According to a recent Access Economics Report, obesity costs Australia \$8.283 billion per annum, as 3.71 million Australians are classified as obese¹.

Obesity is associated with of the development of other chronic diseases including Type 2 Diabetes, cardiovascular disease, osteoarthritis, various cancers and other health conditions². To focus on obesity is also to focus on other chronic health conditions.

Although obesity is a complex issue, there are two main ways to change obesity rates. One is to decrease energy intake and the other is to increase energy expenditure; a combination of both is ideal.

Low levels of physical activity are a major risk factor for ill health and mortality from all causes. People who do not do sufficient physical activity have a greater risk of obesity, cardiovascular disease, colon and breast cancers, Type 2 diabetes and osteoarthritis.

Our submission suggests that modified Tai Chi is an excellent way to increase physical activity amongst Australians, with special consideration to the co-morbidities associated with obesity. Although modified Tai Chi is good for all adults, it is particularly suitable to the largest group of people with obesity in Australia, those aged 55-59 years³.

What is modified Tai Chi?

Tai Chi is an ancient Chinese martial art that involves slow and controlled movements. There are many styles and forms of Tai Chi. Some forms are vigorous with movements such as 'lotus kick' (a combined kick and turn), while other forms are much gentler. As an unregulated industry, it is difficult to determine if a particular Tai Chi class is safe and effective for people with chronic health conditions, especially for older adults who have the highest rates of obesity in Australia.

Over a decade ago, Dr. Paul Lam, an Australian family physician and an international Tai Chi master, together with Tai Chi and medical colleagues, developed a modified form of Tai Chi to suit people with specific chronic health conditions. The Tai Chi for Arthritis, Tai Chi for Diabetes and Tai Chi for Osteoporosis programs were created.

To ensure these programs were taught safely to people with chronic health conditions, a 'train the trainer' workshop was developed. The intensive two-day workshop teaches allied health and fitness professionals (such as physiotherapists, nurses and fitness trainers) to conduct modified Tai Chi classes safely using an effective teaching methodology. DVDs, handbooks and movement charts are

available to support regular home practice for their clients. Arthritis Australia, Diabetes Australia and Osteoporosis Australia support these programs.

Many organisations concerned with obesity highlight the need for evidence based physical activity programs suited to the needs of this population. Tai Chi Productions, Dr Lam's company, has already developed and tested these modified Tai Chi programs that are suitable for people with obesity and associated chronic health conditions. Hospitals, rehabilitation centres, community health services and gyms across Australia are already embracing this simple and effective program to benefit their clients.

Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC), the national government body in New Zealand that provides personal injury cover for all residents, has funded over 25,000 older adults to attend modified tai chi classes as a falls prevention strategy. ACC estimates a saving of \$3 for every \$1 they invest in Tai Chi for Arthritis program⁴.

Currently Tai Chi for Arthritis is the most popular form of modified Tai Chi practised in the world. With over 3,000 trained instructors conducting approximately 10,000 weekly Tai Chi classes, half a million Australians enjoy the benefits of this modified Tai Chi program. However, most of these are in the larger cities. We would like to extend this program into regional and remote areas, where health needs are equally pressing. In order to achieve this we need funding support.

How does modified Tai Chi improve health?

- Modified Tai Chi is safe and easy to learn. It requires minimal space and equipment.
- Tai chi is a form of exercise that allows the individual to assume an active role in obtaining maximal health.
- Tai Chi has been shown to improve balance, strength and flexibility, improvement in pain, stress and anxiety cardiovascular fitness, social functioning, mental health, decrease blood pressure, improved cardiovascular function, improve self-efficacy⁵
- People with chronic disease often turn to complementary therapists to deal with various aspects of fatigue and pain. Tai chi is congruent with both mainstream and complementary therapies, and has been shown to improve health and well being⁶
- Many obese people are sedentary. Dr. Paul Lam's modified Tai Chi has been shown to provide a large and sustained improvement in physical function for many older, sedentary individuals with chronic hip or knee osteoarthritis⁷
- Group intervention has been shown to provide a socialisation context for support and may offer a potential cost effective way to manage this population.
- Tai Chi has a high adherence rate; people often continue to do Tai Chi for years.

What other benefits may be gained by increasing the availability of modified Tai Chi?

The cost (to government, industry and the community) of health care and of lost productivity resulting from obesity, arthritis and diabetes can be measured in millions of dollars.

The delivery of evidence based programs to prevent or ameliorate those conditions is likely to provide a substantial saving in such costs. Modified Tai Chi is one such program. As well as being effective, it is group based and thus increases the client to therapist ratio, offering an additional crucial economic benefit.

The socialisation benefits noted above are a further way of maintaining physical and mental activity for the important target group of older adults.

What we are proposing?

Tai Chi Productions is seeking funding to extend the 'train the trainer' Tai Chi for Health programs to rural and/or regional areas. People living in regional and remote areas are more likely to be overweight or obese than those in major cities and generally experience poorer health. They report a higher incidence of chronic conditions such as obesity, arthritis, diabetes and osteoporosis and lead a more sedentary life style⁸. To address obesity equitably, regional and remote areas of Australia need to be included in health interventions.

Due to high costs associated with travel and conducting smaller workshops, we can only provide very few workshops in regional and remote Australia. We would like to offer 100 workshops in 100 regional and remote locations during 2009. Our fees are \$5500 per workshop. In each workshop we can train up to 25 health or fitness professionals to conduct safe and effective Tai Chi for health classes. We suggest a further \$50,000 be set aside to evaluate the cost / benefit factor of this pilot program.

Therefore the total funding sought is \$600,000 (\$550,000 for fees and \$50,000 for evaluation).

Based on past experience⁹, we train an average of 20 instructors per workshop. Each instructor will teach 100 people per year. We estimate this project will reach and effect 200,000 people with obesity per year.

What is Tai Chi Productions?

Dr. Paul Lam is the director of Tai Chi Productions, a private company committed to improving people's health and quality of life through his modified Tai Chi for Health programs.

With over ten year's experience of delivering 'train the trainer' workshops, Tai Chi Productions have developed the necessary expertise and infrastructure to provide modified Tai Chi training in a cost efficient and effective manner across Australia. In 2007 Tai Chi productions was involved with training over 350 new Tai Chi instructors.

To support newly trained Tai Chi instructors, Tai Chi Productions developed an on-line database, an easy way to locate a modified Tai Chi class anywhere in Australia. Each month, a free e-newsletter is circulated to over 10,000 people with an interest in

Tai Chi for health, reporting on any new research studies, funding opportunities and Tai Chi human interest stories.

Tai Chi Productions is actively involved in research and development of new programs and instructional materials.

Please visit our website www.taichiproductions.com to explore these services further.

¹ Access Economics Report (2008) *The growing cost of obesity in 2008: three years on*. Commissioned by Diabetes Australia

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the National Heart Foundation of Australia (2004) *The relationship between overweight, obesity and cardiovascular disease*. AIHW Cat No CVD 29 Canberra: AIHW (Cardiovascular Disease Series No 23).

³ Access Economics Report (2008) *The growing cost of obesity in 2008: three years on*. Commissioned by Diabetes Australia

⁴ Accident Compensation Corporation Website http://www.acc.co.nz/about-acc/news-information/PRD_CTRB092591

⁵ Wang, C., Collet, J. & Lau, J. (2004) The effects of tai chi on health outcomes in patients with chronic conditions: A systematic review. *Archive of Internal Medicine*, 164 493-501.

⁶ Kuramoto, A. (2006) Therapeutic benefits of tai chi exercise: Research review. *Wisconsin Medical Journal* 105 (7) 40-44

⁷ Fransen, M., Nairn, L., Winstanley, J., Lam, P. & Edmonds, J. (2007) Physical Activity for osteoarthritis management: A randomized controlled clinical trial evaluating hydrotherapy or Tai Chi classes *Arthritis & Rheumatism* 57(3) 407-414

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2006) *Rural, regional and remote health: Indicators of health status and determinants of health*. AIHW Cat No PHE 97 Internet only

⁹ This estimate is based on Tai Chi productions' experience over the last ten years; from outcome of several pilot programs by the NSW area health services; a survey by Arthritis Foundation of Victoria funded by Aged Care Department, Victoria; and Accident Compensation Corporation in New Zealand.