

Obesity in Australia Inquiry - Linda & Brian

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1.1 Introduction.

My wife & I are overweight but working to reduce this problem. We have become aware of a number of practical issues that we feel need to be addressed to cater for the changing population demographics & to help people to manage or reduce their weight. In particular, we have found fresh fruit & vegetables are often tasteless or of poor quality, problems with food labelling, inadequate & misleading dietary information, problems with food & drink quality especially when attending recreational facilities, & we have found much of the equipment being sold has too low a weight limit for much of the population to use it – even exercise equipment is often not designed to handle the weight of users that are even moderately overweight.

We feel that the government needs to mandate improvements in food quality such as reducing fat, sugar & salt content because industry will not make changes without such impetus. They are unable to make changes that will affect their cost of production unless competitors are also making those changes. Drinks also need to be targeted with free or low cost water available to counter the excessive intake of sugar filled drinks. The large drink manufacturers provide drink fridges & post mix machines & have massive advertising budgets giving them a stranglehold on drink sales so they are unlikely to change without legislation.

Better packaging, including managing portion sizes, & far better labelling of food products preferably with some form of easily recognised colour code or symbol to warn of fat & sugar contents would help along with dietary information education.

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Standards of quality & nutrition levels need to be set & effectiveness & implementation regularly reviewed to encourage fresh fruit & vegetable use, but taste levels also need to be addressed. If storage or production methods are affecting these standards, then changes need to be made.

1.2 Fresh Food Taste & Spoilage.

Fresh Fruit & Vegetables can be quite expensive, but a worse problem is that they are often of poor quality with obvious mould & spoilage when purchased from the major supermarkets. It is almost impossible to get onions that do not have some mould & potatoes are regularly green in colour. Whether it is due to being picked early for transport & storage reasons, or whether varieties have been selected primarily for other attributes, many "fresh" fruit & vegetables often have very low taste, with even bananas & apples often tasteless or papery without any real sweetness. Tinned fruit is also often papery or tasteless with sweetness often provided by a sugary syrup that shouldn't be considered "juice." This discourages their use in the diet even though it is recognised that most people do not eat enough of them.

1.3 Bread.

We find that Bread also often spoils quickly - sometimes within two days of purchasing it will be mouldy. The inside of the plastic wrapping regularly has a large amount of condensation when you purchase the bread, so perhaps this is not so surprising, but it leads to a lot of waste & not eating bread because you don't have any left that is usable.

1.4 Pre-packaged Food Fat & Nutritional Content.

It is widely recognised that those working longer hours who cannot spare the time, & the lower socio-economic groups use mostly pre-packaged food. When you look at the fat & nutritional content of many of these products, there is no wonder that the population is getting heavier. Simply increasing the nutritional content requirements & decreasing allowable fat contents would have a great benefit to the population & reduce medical costs. Portion sizes also need to be clearly indicated & not unrealistically small.

1.5 Misleading Food Packaging.

There is a common problem with labelling & packaging being totally misleading. For example, products may proudly proclaim that they are fat free but are mainly sugar which will cause a weight gain, or listed as 95% Fat Free because it sounds far healthier than 5% fat & actually gives the impression of being low in fat.. The other problem is that food labelling will give a fat content per portion size but when you do eventually find the portion size, it is unrealistically small. I think that snacks especially should be packaged into individual portion sizes as it is simply too easy to get carried away & munch through a "large packet" of such items without diminishing your appetite. Many commercially available drinks are full of sugar but they have no form of warning or special labelling. Fruit drinks that may be considered because they appear to be a healthier option often contain very little fruit & a lot of sugar. A comprehensive colour code labelling food system for fat & sugar contents has been suggested in the past & I feel that this really is necessary if we wish to address obesity. If it is possible due to the size of the package, labelling should be in large print & should always be in clear font types in contrasting colours to allow for ease of viewing by an aging population.

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1.6 Fast Food.

Fast food, whether obtained from a venue already cooked or from the supermarket for home use, contains high levels of fat & little nutritional content. While this shouldn't be a surprise, addressing this problem would help address obesity. There is often little choice of food when on the road or out working or shopping, & many people simply like the taste of pies & other fast food. Reducing their fat content & increasing nutritional content would, in many cases, simply address standards that have reduced over time & make them similar to what was available commercially in the past. A recent Jamie Oliver TV show highlighted the decrease in nutritional value & increase in fat & salt in contents as well as the increasing use of "meat by-products" that would formerly not even be able to be sold for human consumption.

1.7 Sporting & Recreational Venues.

Many venues no longer allow people to take their own food or drinks because they wish to maximise the revenues received from outlets that they have licensed for food & drink services. Obviously stopping patrons from supplying their own food & drink protects the interests of those providers. Unfortunately, quite apart from the high cost, such providers normally only supply food that is high in fat content & drinks high in sugar content – apart from bottled water that is often more costly than the sugar filled drinks based on water, despite being manufactured / distributed by the same companies that sell the soft drinks. Many people will simply buy soft drink instead of water because of the perceived greater value for money. I feel that water fountains should be available at sporting venues & even large shopping centres or large shops – preferably also water coolers. This would encourage water consumption, help family finances & improve hydration levels for the community as well as help reduce excessive sugar consumption.

1.8 Dietary Information Education.

My wife & I are in our mid 40's. Neither of us received any comprehensive education about diet during our school years & I find it confusing when looking at different information sources. I'm sure that others are in a similar position. I'd actually be interested in some form of web based education about nutrition that provided me with a sound background & had revision material for future reference. Such a program could probably save the Government money, even if it had some form of incentive to encourage people to do the course.

1.9 Conflicting Dietary Information.

There is a great deal of conflicting information available about what constitutes a good diet. The TV regularly has "new" ideas & there are any number of books & free & fee based web sites. There needs to be a central web site with dietary information that includes access to experts for answering questions. Since people will be looking at diets & food fads, then these should be reviewed & helpful information given regarding correct nutrition for people who may wish to follow such diets.

1.10 Exercise Equipment Weight Limits.

My wife & I were looking to buy exercise equipment. We were shocked to find a lot of equipment was rated for a maximum weight limit of 100kg – even a weight lifting bench was only rated for an 80kg maximum – often not even strong enough for the user's weight.

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Often the weight limit is hard to find & hidden in the users guide, but it is ridiculous that equipment that could be important to lose weight is rated for too low a weight limit to be usable for those who need it most. This sort of silly weight limits is common with many items; even ladders sold as “heavy duty” or “builders” ladders may have a weight limit as low as 80kg (very often 100kg) – & I have seen “safety steps” with only an 80kg weight loading limit. This often would be insufficient for a user’s body weight, & certainly doesn’t take into account the weight of any load they may need to carry.

1.11 Suitable exercise for persons with injuries or disabilities.

I have arthritis & damaged ankles. I find that most suggested exercises are walking, running etc which I cannot do. There needs to be information available on forms of exercise suitable for those with injuries or disabilities. This is particularly important because such injuries & related pain often cause a person to lead a more sedentary lifestyle, & weight gain will exacerbate many injuries & lead to stress on joints, leading to further complications that are often expensive to treat.

1.12 Department of Veteran’s Affairs Heart Smart program.

The Department of Veteran’s Affairs (DVA) runs a Heart Smart program. This provides Veterans with a 12 month subscription to a gymnasium along with nutrition education. It is a good idea, but only runs when they can get a minimum number of about 12 people, so some persons may be on the waiting list for years before they can start. I have been waiting for a few years because of this very reason.

Other veterans we have talked to who have been fortunate enough to have already taken part in this program had told us that they found it of great benefit. Unfortunately, since there is no follow up after the 12 month period is completed, many tend to revert back to their old habits. More involvement for spouses & carers would be of great benefit, since they are the ones who will often do the buying & food preparation.

1.13 Commercial Gymsnasiums.

We have visited a couple of commercial gymsnasiums when they offered promotional low cost usage. We found a couple of problems with them. Firstly, none of them offer any safe place to put car keys or valuables – even if they have swimming pools. Surely they could have locker facilities that are in an area, that for security purposes is only available to the staff & not open to the public. Most have front counter staff, so that would not be a major change. Secondly, a TV show looked at the level of faecal bacteria found on exercise equipment in a gymnasium used only by a professional sporting team. This gymnasium was used regularly by only by the single professional team that was obviously composed of healthy members that followed strict hygiene standards. The levels of contamination were shown to pose a significant health risk. It makes one wonder how bad a hazard is the equipment shared by the general public & not regularly effectively cleaned. Lastly, the gymsnasiums had signs stating that equipment was only to be used in an approved manner but required additional expense to show how to perform those exercises so that doesn’t encourage a person to pursue any longer term commitment.

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1.14 Transport Safety Concerns.

A problem that also needs to be looked at is standards regarding seat sizes, seat belts lengths & positioning etc. Some seats in busses & aircraft are simply unable to fit a standard person – recently we were on a bus where a 85kg man was unable to fit in the seat & it is common that seats will not fit larger persons & seat belts often will not fit a person who otherwise fits into a seat comfortably.

Since my wife is my official carer, we have found “Carer’s Queensland” to be invaluable to us for support, group activities & other social interaction. For group outings, they have been fortunate enough to be able to use the HAAC bus. HAAC recently “improved” their transportation by purchasing a new bus. This new bus was cramped & uncomfortable, with many passengers sitting on the aisle seat having to place their feet in the aisle. On one occasion, two large passengers were allowed to take up three seats together, but if the bus is full to capacity, this is not possible.

Another complication with the small size of the seats is the length (or lack thereof) of the seatbelt. Most of the passengers had difficulty doing up the seatbelt, & I think one or two even had to simply “hold it in place” across themselves. Obviously in the event of an accident, this would prove useless, negating the existence of seatbelt protection at all.

Everyone, including people of “normal weight” complained about these problems, so even though it was a “nice, new bus”, it was a unanimous vote that the “old bus” was greatly preferred. Unfortunately, we were told that the “old bus” couldn’t be used. I think that some people would prefer to NOT go on the outing, especially if it is a longer distance. Sadly, this detracts from the benefits of the social interactions that Carer’s Queensland is trying to provide. We have found similar problems with “shuttle” busses from airports & other public transport.

1.15 Requirement for Government legislation.

Most areas of food & drink sales in Australia are dominated by very large organisations with huge advertising budgets or represented by industry organisations that very effectively advertise & lobby government. In the past, regardless of what the suggested change has been to food standards or food or junk food advertising, there has been an immediate lobby & advertising effort to block it. Government seems to be very attentive to industry voices concerned with cost increases & especially to concerns of profit reductions affecting shareholder returns.

Without legislated changes, industry will not make changes because they fear that increased costs of production will reduce their competitiveness. Legislated changes create the level playing field because all companies must comply at the same time, but despite this, changes will always be fought because it involves extra expense for Research & Development or process changes. Unfortunately, the public purse is being increasingly impacted by the medical costs of obesity due to inaction, & our already stretched medical facilities really cannot cope with the projected increased work loads. Inaction therefore, will only result in higher costs to all consumers & shareholders, through increased taxation or reduced access to medical services.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission,
Linda & Brian