



*FE 16106/08*

## **Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing**

### ***Inquiry into Obesity in Australia***

#### **Submitting body: Sports Medicine Australia (SMA)**

#### **Background**

Sports Medicine Australia (SMA) is a not for profit association of health professionals and researchers with a particular interest in the impact of physical activity on health. SMA has played a leading role in encouraging research and the dissemination of research findings in this area.

Obesity is an outcome of energy imbalance: it develops gradually over a period of time when energy taken in through nutrition is not balanced by energy used in physical activity. Obesity is associated with a range of chronic health problems that will place an increasing cost on the Australian health system and on the quality of life of individual Australians.

Current approaches to dealing with the problem are hampered by misinformation, lack of understanding of the basic issues, poorly thought through and short term policy approaches and sensationalised and irresponsible media reporting.

#### **Summary of SMA views on obesity in Australia**

(All the following points have the support of substantial research and evidence, which can be provided if required).

- Weight gain is incremental through most of a person's life. Policy responses to address weight gain need to recognise this and take a whole of life approach.
- The cohort of the population with the highest current prevalence of overweight and obesity, and therefore likely to have the greatest immediate impact on health budgets are middle-aged men. There needs to be an immediate and urgent policy approach targeting this group.
- Among adult women, the highest rate of weight gain is among young women in their twenties. While comparable data are not available for men, it is likely that this life-stage, (when both men and women are balancing the demands of entry into the paid workforce and starting a family), is associated with increasing energy imbalance in both men and women, as time spent in physical activity gives way to work and family demands. Young working adults with children also need a specific policy approach to prevent the development this energy imbalance over time.
- Current policies focusing on children – to the exclusion of the two groups above – are a serious mistake. Weight gain in children is distorted by the needs of a growing body and the majority of children get to the end of their

school years with a healthy body weight. Weight gain starts for most of the population after they leave school.

- It is impossible to “obesity-proof” people for life by a focus on their childhood. The current group in the population with the highest obesity rates (middle-aged men) had high levels of sport and physical education at school and led much more active lives than today’s children. This should be a signal that focussing entirely on children will not prevent weight gain in adulthood.
- The health deficits of overweight and obesity can be ameliorated by increasing physical activity, even if there is no actual reduction in weight. In fact, the greatest benefit from physical activity comes when a person moves from totally sedentary to undertaking small amounts of physical activity (even less than the current physical activity guidelines of 30 minutes a day of moderate intensity activity.)
- There is increasing evidence that excessive time spent sitting exacerbates the health problems of obesity.
- Almost half the Australian population appear not to understand the concept of energy balance and do not understand – or do not believe – the current guidelines about the health benefits of small amounts of moderate intensity physical activity. More alarmingly, these views appear to be shared by health professionals who should be advising their patients to become more active.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. Policies to combat obesity need to take a “whole of life” and “whole of day” approach.
2. Specific policy responses need to be considered for groups most at risk, especially middle-aged men and young women and men.
3. A simplified guideline or message needs to be developed about the importance of energy balance, as well as of moderate intensity physical activity and too much sitting.
4. A major national public health campaign needs to be undertaken to sell this message, and its effects should be evaluated.
5. Specific education needs to be developed and undertaken with health professionals in this area.

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