
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Weighing it up

Obesity in Australia

House of Representatives
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing

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Canberra

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Foreword

On 11 May 2009, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) published the latest National Health Survey 2007-08 figures. The Survey found that more adult Australians were overweight or obese in 2007-2008 compared with 1995 (when the previous survey was conducted). The Survey found that 68 percent of adult men and 55 percent of adult women were overweight or obese. This shows a growing incidence over 12 years as only 64 percent of men and 49 percent of women were overweight or obese in 1995. For children, there was a significant increase in the proportion who are obese from 5.2 percent in 1995 to 7.8 percent in 2007-08.¹

This inquiry into obesity in the Australian population, focusing on future implications for Australia's health system, has revealed that there are high personal and economic costs associated with this increasing prevalence. The Committee has heard there is a vast array of direct and indirect costs to - not just the health system - but individuals, families, communities, and employers.

Access Economics recently updated its report on the economic costs of obesity in Australia and deemed the total annual cost in 2008 to be growing and in the region of \$58.2 billion. The financial costs account for \$8.283 billion (\$3.6 billion productivity costs; \$2 billion health system costs; and \$1.9 billion carer costs) with the net cost of lost wellbeing amounting to a further \$49.9 billion.² These costs are staggering.

Throughout the course of this inquiry Committee members travelled the length and breadth of the country, visiting capital cities, regional areas and rural and remote communities to gather information on what these costs actually mean.

The Committee held 13 public hearings to canvass the views of different people with an interest in the subject including: doctors, allied health professionals and

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, National Health Survey: Summary of Results 2007-08, <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4364.0Main%20Features62007-08?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4364.0&issue=2007-08&num=&view>>, 11 May 2009.

2 Access Economics, Official Transcript of Evidence, 26 November 2008, p. 4.

patients; hospital administrators; health economists and academic experts; urban planning bodies; and the food industry. We visited a number of hospitals, schools and programs that promote healthy eating and the benefits of physical exercise, in various guises. We heard from federal, state and local government officials about diverse public health campaigns, policies and activities that seek to prevent and manage the obesity epidemic in children, youth and adults.

The Committee's inquiry has been conducted at the same time as the Federal Government's National Preventative Health Taskforce examines the burden of chronic disease caused by obesity, tobacco and the excessive consumption of alcohol, in order to develop a national preventative health strategy, which will also be presented to the Minister for Health and Ageing in the near future. The National Preventative Health Taskforce report will deliver comprehensive technical recommendations and an action timeline.

Our report complements the National Preventative Health Taskforce process insofar as we make general recommendations on what governments, industry, individuals and the broader community can do to reverse our growing waistlines. Our report differs in that it also, importantly, serves as a platform for many stakeholders to share their views and tell their stories. As some of the text and photos in our report attest, there are some quite exciting and innovative solutions already underway, spanning from well-designed urban developments to council-run exercise programs in parks to community gardens and cooking classes.

The Committee has been pleased by the interest in the inquiry and believes that there is real momentum in the community to do more.

The Committee hopes that our report, together with the Preventative Health Taskforce Strategy, takes the debate forward but moreover results in actions that reverse the trend of overweight and obesity in Australia.

On behalf of my Committee colleagues, I would like to thank all those who took part in the inquiry process, from providing written submissions and/or oral evidence at public hearings, to supporting the Committee's inspections or providing private briefings to the Committee on other occasions.

I would also like to thank my Committee colleagues for their work on this inquiry, and the Secretariat staff.

Mr Steve Georganas MP
Chair



Membership of the Committee

Chair Mr Steve Georganas MP

Deputy Chair Mr Steve Irons MP (from 12/11/08)
Hon Kevin Andrews MP (to 10/11/08)

Members Mr James Bidgood MP

Mr Jamie Briggs MP (from 25/9/08)

Mr Mark Coulton MP

Ms Jill Hall MP

Ms Catherine King MP

Mrs Julia Irwin MP

Mrs Margaret May MP

Mr Scott Morrison MP (to 25/9/08)

Ms Amanda Rishworth MP

Committee Secretariat

Secretary Mr James Catchpole

Inquiry Secretary Ms Sara Edson

Senior Research Officer Ms Penny Wijnberg

Research Officer Dr Narelle McGlusky

Administrative Officers Mrs Gaye Milner

Ms Tarran Snape



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.



List of abbreviations

%DI	Percentage Daily Intake
AANA	Australian Association of National Advertisers
AASC	Active After-school Communities
ABHI	Australian Better Health Initiative
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCC	Australian Consumer and Competition Commission
AFGC	Australian Food and Grocery Council
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
AMA	Australian Medical Association
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
ANZOS	Australian and New Zealand Obesity Society
APD	Accredited Practising Dietitian
ASC	Australian Sports Commission
AWASH	Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health
BEACH	Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health
BMI	Body Mass Index
CFAC	Coalition on Food Advertising to Children

CIS	Centre for Independent Studies
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CO-OPS	Community Obesity Prevention Sites Collaboration
Committee	House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing Committee
CSIRO	Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation
CTS	Children's Television Standards
CVD	Cardiovascular Disease
DAA	Dietitians Association of Australia
DALY	Disability Adjusted Life Year
Delfin	Delfin Lend Lease
DoHA	Department of Health and Ageing
Foresight	Tackling Obesities: Future Choices project report
FSA	Food Standards Agency (UK)
FSANZ	Food Standards Australia New Zealand
GP	General Practitioner
HACC	Home and Community Care
HIKCUPS	Hunter Illawarra Kids Challenge Using Parent Support
HRS	Health Risk Survey
MBS	Medicare Benefits Schedule
NGO	Non-government Organisation
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
NHS	National Health Service
NSA	National Seniors Australia

NSW	New South Wales
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PBS	Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme
PE	Physical Education
Qld	Queensland
SA	South Australia
Taskforce	National Preventative Health Taskforce
UK	United Kingdom
Vic	Victoria
WA	Western Australia
WAMS	Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service
Weight Watchers	Weight Watchers Australasia
WHO	World Health Organisation
Woolworths	Woolworths Limited
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association



List of recommendations

2 Future implications for Australia

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing commission economic modelling in order to establish the cost implications of obesity to Australia and the cost-benefits of various interventions.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing commit to regular and ongoing surveillance and monitoring of Australians' weight, diet and physical activity levels, and that the data gathered is used to formulate, develop and evaluate long-term policy responses to obesity in Australia. This data collection should build on the foundation established by the *2007 Australian National Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey*, and proposed National Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey and National Health Risk Survey, providing up-to-date information about the prevalence of obesity in Australia.

3 What more can governments do?

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing work with state, territory and local governments through the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council to develop and implement long-term, effective, well-targeted social marketing and education campaigns about obesity and healthy lifestyles, and ensure that these marketing campaigns are made more successful by linking them to broader policy responses to obesity.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing continue to support the Federal Government's Active After-school Communities program and consider ways to expand the program to more sites across Australia.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing work with State and Territory Health Ministers through the Australian Health Ministers' Conference to ensure equity in access by publicly funding bariatric surgery, including multidisciplinary support teams, for those patients that meet appropriate clinical guidelines.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing develop a national register of bariatric surgery with the appropriate stakeholders. The register should capture data on the number of patients, the success of surgery and any possible complications. The data that is generated should be used to track the long-term success and cost-effectiveness of bariatric surgery.

Recommendation 7

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing place obesity on the Medicare Benefits Schedule as a chronic disease requiring an individual management plan.

Recommendation 8

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing explore ways that General Practitioners collate data on the height and weight of their patients, and the data be utilised to generate statistics on the level of obesity in Australia.

Recommendation 9

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing work with State and Territory Health Ministers through the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council to consider adopting a tiered model of health care for obesity management, incorporating prevention, community-based primary care and acute care.

Recommendation 10

The Committee recommends that the Treasurer and the Minister for Health and Ageing investigate the use of tax incentives to improve the affordability of fresh, healthy food and access to physical activity programs for all Australians, particularly those living in rural and remote areas.

Recommendation 11

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing commission research into the effect of the advertising of food products with limited nutritional value on the eating behaviour of children and other vulnerable groups.

Recommendation 12

The Committee recommends that the Federal Government use the results of the Food Standards Australia New Zealand food labelling review to create a set of standard guidelines to ensure that food labels provide consistent nutritional information. Using these guidelines the Federal Government should work with industry to develop and implement this standardised food label within a reasonable timeframe.

Recommendation 13

The Committee recommends that the Federal Government work with all levels of government and the private sector to develop nationally consistent urban planning guidelines which focus on creating environments that encourage Australians to be healthy and active.

Recommendation 14

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing fund research into the causes of obesity and the success or otherwise of interventions to reduce overweight and obesity.

4 A role for industry

Recommendation 15

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing adopt a phased approach regarding regulations on the reformulation of food products. Industry should be encouraged to make changes through self-regulation but if industry fails to make concrete changes within a reasonable timeframe the Federal Government should consider regulations.

Recommendation 16

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing engage with peak bodies such as the Australian Food and Grocery Council, the Dietitians Association of Australia, and the Heart Foundation, to develop and implement a *Healthy Food Code of Good Practice* tailored to Australian conditions.

Recommendation 17

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing review the adequacy of regulations governing weight loss products and programs with the intention of ensuring that they can only be sold and promoted if nutritionally sound and efficacious.

The review should also examine ways to improve industry compliance with the Weight Management Council of Australia's Weight Management Code of Practice.

Recommendation 18

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing encourage private and public employers to adopt programs and incentives that will promote active and healthy lifestyle choices by all Australians within the workplace.

6 Community programs and partnerships

Recommendation 19

The Committee recommends that the Federal Government continue to support initiatives such as community garden projects, cooking classes and the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, in order to teach children and adults about:

- The benefits of growing and eating fresh fruit and vegetables; and
- Preparing and enjoying healthy and nutritious meals.

Recommendation 20

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and Ageing explore ways to enhance the *How do you measure up?* campaign website and further develop it as a central repository of information about the benefits of healthy eating and exercise.

