

Chapter 8

Education campaigns

8.1 As part of a comprehensive approach to reduce obesity, public health campaigns are essential to raise awareness, improve nutrition literacy, attitudes and behaviours around diet and physical activity.¹

8.2 The World Health Organisation (WHO) has identified public education campaigns as an effective means of disseminating messages about obesity prevention at a population level, and can be a useful tool for population behaviour change and shifting social norms to preference healthy behaviours.²

Lack of leadership and investment

8.3 According to Mr Terry Slevin, Chief Executive Officer of the Public Health Association of Australia, the lack of high-profile education and prevention programs at a national level raises the question of government's commitment and investment in public health:

There seems to be...little appetite to boost investment in public health or prevention, even though we've got an enormous body of evidence that suggests this is one of the best buys we can make in health.³

8.4 Other submitters also noted the current lack of government leadership and investment in prevention programs and sustained initiatives.⁴

8.5 Many inquiry participants called for additional funding for public health campaigns to improve attitudes and behaviours around diet, physical activity and sedentary behaviour.⁵

8.6 For example, the Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance recommended sustained, funded and well-researched mass-media campaigns to increase activity and improve nutrition.⁶

1 Heart Foundation, *Submission 139*, p. 11.

2 Obesity Policy Coalition, *Tipping the scales*, September 2017, p. 12; Obesity Policy Coalition, *Submission 135*, p. 27.

3 Mr Terry Slevin, Chief Executive Officer, Public Health Association of Australia, *Committee Hansard*, Melbourne, 4 September 2018, p. 16.

4 See for example: Food Fairness Illawarra, *Submission 27*, Attachment 1, p. 6; Food Governance Node, *Submission 58*, pp. 8-9; Live Lighter WA, *Submission 88*, p. 10.

5 See for example: WA Cancer Prevention Research Unit, *Submission 8*, p. 2; Global Obesity Centre, *Submission 13*, p. 7; Primary Care Partnership, *Submission 28*, p. 3; Ms Leanne Chambour, *Submission 32*, p. 2; Sugar By Half, *Submission 48*, p. 4; Queensland Country Women's Association, *Submission 56*, p. 2; Food Governance Node, *Submission 58*, p. 15; Public Health Association of Australia, *Submission 73*, p. 17; CHOICE, *Submission 90*, p. 4.

6 Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance, *Submission 106*, p. 12.

Healthy Food Partnership

8.7 In November 2015, the Australian Government initiated the Healthy Food Partnership (HFP), a non-regulatory, collaboration between public health groups, food industry bodies and government.

8.8 The HFP is aimed at tackling obesity, encouraging healthy eating and the reformulation of products by food manufacturers.⁷

8.9 The HFP work to date has focused on the development and design process of key activities, including improving consumers' knowledge and awareness of healthier food choices, and educating consumers on appropriate portion and serve sizes, as well as supporting consumers to eat appropriate levels of core foods such as fruit and vegetables.⁸ Another focus of the HFP is to support the industry to reformulate their foods (see Chapter 5).

8.10 The Australian Government Department of Health informed the committee that some of these activities are expected to start from late 2018 / early 2019.⁹

8.11 Inquiry participants commented that they support the HFP but noted its lack of progress to date.¹⁰ For example, Ms Alexandra Jones, Research Fellow at The George Institute, told the committee:

The Healthy Food Partnership is a good start and it could be effective, but right now it's totally under resourced and it's moving slowly.¹¹

8.12 Other submitters were concerned about the capacity for the HFP to operate and deliver tangible outcomes because of the undue influence of food companies within HFP governance, and the apparent lack of monitoring and accountability mechanisms.¹²

8.13 For example, the Tasmanian Government noted in its submission that the food industry should be a key stakeholder in the development of initiatives such as the HFP, but 'there is a risk of undue commercial influence on the development of policy and guidelines, and this requires careful consideration'.¹³

7 Australian Government Department of Health, *Submission 142*, p. 5.

8 Australian Government Department of Health, *Submission 142*, p. 6.

9 Australian Government Department of Health, *Submission 142*, p. 6.

10 See for example: Heart Foundation, *Submission 139*, pp. 9-10; Australian Industry Group, *Submission 117*, p. 11; Obesity Policy Coalition, *Submission 135*, p. 12.

11 Ms Alexandra Jones, Research Fellow, Food Policy Division, The George Institute, *Committee Hansard*, Sydney, 6 August 2018, p. 23.

12 See for example: School of Social Sciences, The University of Adelaide, *Submission 52*, p. 5; Food Governance Node, *Submission 58*, pp. 8-9; Mark Lawrence, Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition and School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences, Deakin University, *Submission 95*, p. 4; Sugar By Half, *Submission 48*, p. 3; The George Institute, *Submission 104*, p. 1.

13 Tasmanian Government, *Submission 144*, p. 14.

8.14 The School of Social Sciences at the University of Adelaide is of the view that there has been a substantial disinvestment in obesity prevention by the Australian Government, and it made the following assessment of the HFP:

We are sceptical about the capacity for the Partnership to deliver meaningful outputs due to failure to manage conflicts of interest, lack of accountability mechanisms, and commitment to describing obesity as a matter of individual responsibility and choices.¹⁴

LiveLighter

8.15 The Western Australian Government has funded the *LiveLighter* campaign since 2012.¹⁵ The campaign was extended to Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory in 2014 and to the Northern Territory in 2015.¹⁶

8.16 *LiveLighter* is a public education program, which aims to encourage people to eat well, be physically active and maintain a healthy weight via a variety of initiatives including mass-media and social media campaigns, community engagement activities and the production of tools and resources.¹⁷

8.17 For example, in 2015, *LiveLighter* ran a mass-media campaign in Victoria around the contribution of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) to the development of visceral toxic fat around vital organs. An evaluation of the campaign showed that it resulted in a significant reduction in consumption of SSBs and an increased knowledge of the health effects of SSB consumption.¹⁸

8.18 Submitters noted the effectiveness of the *LiveLighter* campaigns and are of the view that more funding should be directed towards mass-media education campaigns.¹⁹

8.19 However, Swinburne University of Technology was critical of these types of campaigns, arguing they can further contribute to the stigma associated with weight and body shapes:

Media campaigns, especially those directed at adults (i.e. *LiveLighter*) disempowers people by focusing too heavily on the weight and shape of the body at the expense of health behaviours that are within their control, and upstream action on social, cultural, environmental, and commercial determinants of health. Furthermore focusing efforts on obesity prevention

14 School of Social Sciences, The University of Adelaide, *Submission 52*, p. 5

15 Government of Western Australia, *Submission 120*, p. 4.

16 *LiveLighter*, 'Background', <https://livelighter.com.au/About/Background>, accessed 22 November 2018.

17 *Live Lighter WA*, *Submission 88*, p. 1.

18 Heart Foundation, *Submission 139*, p. 11.

19 See for example: Obesity Policy Coalition, *Submission 135*, p. 27; Heart Foundation, *Submission 139*, p. 11; Dietitians Association of Australia, *Submission 107*, p. 8; Tasmanian Government, *Submission 144*, p. 12.

pathologises larger bodies, creating an environment that entrenches weight stigma.²⁰

Committee view

National Education Campaign

8.20 The committee is of the view that public education campaigns are effective and play an important role in improving attitudes and behaviours around diet and physical activity. The committee agrees with submitters that there is a critical need for developing a suite of publicly funded education campaigns.

8.21 Overall, the committee heard that there is a clear need for government leadership to establish and resource comprehensive education campaigns. At present, the Australian Government is doing too little in this area. The HFP has made no tangible progress since its establishment. There is no overall strategy around the development and implementation of education campaigns and programs that take a holistic approach to improve behaviours around diet and physical activity. This reflects a lack of government leadership and absence of a national obesity strategy.

Recommendation 14

8.22 The committee recommends the proposed National Obesity Taskforce is funded to develop and oversee the implementation of a range of National Education Campaigns with different sectors of the Australian community. Educational campaigns will be context dependent and aimed at supporting individuals, families and communities to build on cultural practices and improve nutrition literacy and behaviours around diet, physical activity and well-being.

20 Swinburne University of Technology, *Submission 75*, p. 10.