

Submission No. 44

(Inq into Obesity)

16/05/08



## **FITNESS AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION INQUIRY INTO OBESITY IN AUSTRALIA**

### **Introduction**

Fitness Australia welcomes the invitation to make a submission to the inquiry into obesity in Australia, to be conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing.

Obesity is estimated to cost the Australian economy \$21 billion<sup>1</sup> annually. This submission has been prepared to assist the Standing Committee in its consideration of preventative strategies for lowering Australia's obesity rate amongst children, youth and adults and to help create a healthier, fitter Australia.

Fitness Australia would welcome the opportunity to expand on this submission, as required, and relevant contact details are provided at the conclusion of the paper.

### **About Fitness Australia**

Fitness Australia is the national fitness industry association working for a fitter, healthier Australia. It is a not-for-profit incorporated association. Our mission is to raise standards within the industry and support, promote and represent the interests of the fitness industry.

Our membership comprises approximately 800 business members and 18,000 registered fitness professionals across Australia.

Business members include fitness centre owners and managers, from small to medium sized business and personal training studios through to large, multi-national businesses and franchises.

Registered exercise professionals are those who have successfully attained the recognised qualifications, have registered with Fitness Australia and are generally employed or contracted by fitness businesses or are self-employed within the fitness industry.

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<sup>1</sup> **The Economic Costs of Obesity** – Report by Access Economics to Diabetes Australia, October 2006

The Fitness Australia registration scheme is largely based on the Australian government approved National Industry Training Package, a set of nationally endorsed standards and qualifications for recognising and assessing the skills of people in the fitness industry.

Increasingly, tertiary qualified graduates, in a range of exercise science disciplines, are now entering the fitness industry. Both the vocational and tertiary qualifications provide an adequate competency base for exercise professionals to deliver appropriate exercise programs to a range of clients. Many registered exercise professionals also work in collaboration with allied health professionals and/or a multi-disciplinary team of health professionals to monitor and manage the progress of people at risk of chronic disease who are undertaking exercise programs designed to improve their health and wellbeing.

A key aspect of maintaining standards within the fitness industry is on-going education and professional development. Under Fitness Australia's Continuing Education Scheme, there are currently 400 education and training organisations which deliver approved programs to fitness professionals for Continuing Education Credits (CECs). The attainment of a particular number of CECs is a requirement of professional registration renewal.

Member businesses of Fitness Australia are required to comply with State and Territory Industry Codes of Practice, endorsed by the relevant Departments of Fair Trading and Consumer Protection. The Codes of Practice set standards of professionalism, safety and customer care.

Consumers visiting fitness centres operated and staffed by Fitness Australia members therefore have the reassurance that the facilities, programs and advice offered are developed to the highest standard and are based on the most up-to-date scientific and medical data.

### **Fitness and a National Preventative Health Strategy**

Fitness Australian fully supports the Government's commitment to develop a National Preventative Health Strategy, supported by a National Preventative Health Taskforce. The Taskforce will identify long-term strategies and partnerships for tackling the burden of disease caused by obesity as a matter of priority.

Fitness Australia submits that the services and facilities provided by its members are a key part of a broad national approach to bring greater focus to preventative health care. Therefore we look forward to being a partner with the Government and the Taskforces to develop and implement a National

Preventative Health Strategy focusing on the new National Health Priority Area - obesity.

There are a number of Federal, State and Local Government regulatory hurdles that prevent greater levels of exercise participation which the Taskforce should consider such as:

- Inclusion of registered exercise professionals and accredited fitness industry providers in the Private Health Insurance (Accreditation) Rules 2008 as providers of chronic disease and health management programs, specialising in delivery of appropriate exercise programs to prevent chronic disease and improve the health of participants;
- Amendment to the Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act to allow the first \$1,000 of the aggregate of the taxable values of certain benefits to employees to include the membership of any registered gymnasium or fitness centre, to increase exercise participation and productivity in the workforce;
- Review and amendment of Local Government regulations regarding the use of outdoor areas for small groups participating in exercise programs with registered exercise professionals.

**Recommendation:**

*That as part of any such National Preventative Health Strategy, priority should be given to removing existing Federal, State and Local Government regulatory hurdles that prevent exercise participation.*

**About the Australian Fitness Industry**

The Australian fitness industry is growing rapidly and diversifying to meet the changing needs of the community. The culture of the fitness industry is also changing. The past emphasis on providing services to improve body image or muscle tone, aimed at fit and healthy 18-35 year old people, is making way for an emphasis on the health and wellbeing of all members of the community. Appropriate services are now offered to people of all levels of fitness and across all age groups, from children through to senior citizens. These services are offered in a range of formats and business models, from small, community based organisations to large, multi-national fitness chains.

The fitness industry has a clear role in helping to create a fitter, healthier Australia that will ultimately deliver a range of longer-term social and economic benefits across the nation. It offers a safe, controlled, professional, affordable and effective environment in which people of all ages and levels of fitness can participate in a range of physical activities.

### Primary Health Care Plans

Promoting and encouraging exercise participation should be one of the key components of any primary health care plan. However, to ensure that the fitness regime proposed in the patient's plan is safe and appropriate Fitness Australia submits that fitness centres operated and staffed by Fitness Australia members and registered professionals have the facilities, programs and advice of the highest standard.

Increasingly, medical and other health professionals will be encouraged to prescribe exercise programs for people at risk of developing chronic diseases. Whilst the primary role of the medical or health professional will be to diagnose, prescribe programs, monitor and review the patient's condition, the fitness industry provides specialist skills and expertise in the **delivery** of these exercise programs. Currently, many registered exercise professionals work in collaboration with other health professionals to achieve these outcomes.

A major incentive for greater participation in appropriate exercise programs in the fitness centre environment would be the introduction of a greater range of private health insurance rebates for exercise programs and services, delivered by registered exercise professionals.

### **Recommendations:**

- 1. That registered exercise professionals and accredited fitness industry providers be included as 'other health care providers' in the Private Health Insurance (Accreditation) Rules 2008.*
- 2. That private health insurance rebates be extended for people who choose to undertake an approved exercise program in an accredited fitness facility and/or with a registered exercise professional.*

### Economic incentives for lifestyle change

Prevention of weight gain and chronic diseases, largely brought about by inactivity and poor nutrition, must be a priority for the Australian healthcare system. Beyond health promotion activities, Fitness Australia submits that a greater investment should be made in encouraging the population to increase the level of personal responsibility and self-care for improving or sustaining individual health status. This would be enhanced by the provision of economic incentives for lifestyle change, including exercise program and other weight loss incentives through the tax, Medicare and/or private health systems.

**Recommendation:**

*That a range of economic incentives for lifestyle change be considered and adopted.*

**The taxation system and 'fitness in the workplace'**

A priority for Fitness Australia is to work with Australian employers to promote a 'best practice' approach to physical activity in the workplace.

As part of this program, Fitness Australia has developed an education initiative to help inform corporate Australia of the benefits to employers of investing in the promotion of physical activity e.g. reduction in sick days and improved productivity.

Fitness Australia will also support its members in developing 'fitness in the workplace' programs and to link with local businesses to develop programs designed to encourage employees to be more active and lead healthier lifestyles. It is proposed that such programs will be developed specifically for people who are relatively inactive.

However, the Fringe Benefits Tax Assessment Act (FBTAA) currently discourages virtually all small-to-medium sized and many large businesses from participating in and delivering such programs to their employees.

This was addressed in a recent submission to inform the Commonwealth Government's decision-making for the 2008-09 Federal Budget (attached).

**Recommendation:**

*That the FBTAA be amended to allow the first \$1,000 of the aggregate of the taxable values of certain benefits to employees to include the membership of any registered gymnasium or fitness centre.*

**Chronic disease prevention programs**

The fitness industry currently provides a range of programs and services designed to prevent and/or treat chronic illness, such as the International Diabetes Institute (IDI) 'Lift for Life' program and the National Heart Foundation 'Heartmoves' program. These types of programs are also beneficial for a range of other health issues including falls prevention in older adults and the alleviation of certain types of mental illness, such as depression, through regular exercise.

The fitness industry has the capacity to expand this range of programs and services given its investment in a professional workforce, equipment, premises and technology.

Fitness Australia submits that Fitness Australia accredited members of the fitness industry should be recognised as providers of health-related programs and services, with special expertise in *delivery* of services, as opposed to providers of '*sport, recreation or entertainment*' as currently described in the draft Private Health Insurance (Accreditation) Rules 2008.

**Recommendation:**

- 1. That the Australian Government support the fitness industry in implementing a greater range of evidence-based exercise programs, such as the International Diabetes Institute "Lift for Life" program, that prevent and/or treat chronic diseases such as Type II Diabetes.*
- 2. That accredited members of the fitness industry be recognised as providers of health-related programs and services, with special expertise in delivery of services in the Private Health Insurance (Accreditation) Rules 2008.*

**Children's programs**

The fitness industry also provides services and programs for children that are fun, safe and effective. In the United Kingdom, the fitness industry has embraced the community outreach program called 'Adopt-a-School' that offers suitable exercise programs for primary school children (Grade 5-6), free of charge. This program is supported by the UK Government and is a model that could easily be adapted into the Australian environment.

**Recommendation:**

*That the Australian Government support the Australian fitness industry in implementing a local "Adopt a School" style program*

**Business Support for Small Business**

The strong growth in the industry is evidenced by the emergence of small business models that provide accessibility, flexibility and cost effectiveness for the general public who want and need exercise and fitness services.

Fitness Australia, in partnership with the Australian Government AusIndustry Program, is supporting a culture of entrepreneurship and the development of

best practice operating skills in small business in the fitness industry, through business training and support solutions.

This training and development program will ensure that industry operators of the future have the skills to help them grow and reach their full potential.

### Conclusion

Fitness Australia welcomes the opportunity to be involved in any government led initiatives, committees or taskforces, that would be considered appropriate, that involve the need to engage industry and other stakeholders in finding practical solutions to encouraging healthy lifestyles and preventing and managing the obesity epidemic in children, youth and adults.

In the meantime Fitness Australia would be willing to give evidence to the Committee as and when appropriate.

**16 May 2008**

For further information:

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***Attachment: 2008 Budget Submission***