
From: rory poulter
Sent: Sunday, 1 June 2008 4:44 PM
To: Committee, HAA (REPS)
Subject: Submission to the Inquiry into Obesity in Australia

1 June 2008

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Inquiry into Obesity in Australia

Submission by Rory Poulter

This submission specifically addresses the prevention of an overweight population in Australia and not necessarily to the management and treatment of the existing overweight population.

There is a growing consensus within Australia and around the world that the various strategies to prevent the worsening of the overweight and obese problem are failing and that there needs to be a different approach to tackle this issue. The many and various strategies that have been applied to this issue have largely fallen in the behavioural modification category and that these have largely been ineffective at preventing further weight gain in whole populations.

There is no doubt that in recent decades we are better than ever at supplying and producing an ever greater array of foods with animal fat content into the consumable environment. We are better and more efficient at producing animals for consumption, as well as for storage, distribution, preservation, and manufacturing of cheaper animal content foods. Is it any wonder that persuasive behavioural modification strategies for whole of populations are failing to overcome our deep urge to eat such foods and arrest the increasing weight gain of the population. It would make sense to try strategies based upon prevention of excessive amounts of animal fats before entering the consumable environment.

We have to ask ourselves do the existing or proposed strategies rely upon the behavioural modification of people in an unmodified consumable food environment. If this is so then it is almost certain that these strategies will fail. Food advertising bans; health awareness programs targeting certain groups of people in society; increased physical activity programs; retrofitting urban environments for more conducive physical exercise; and many more strategies will inevitably fail as they rely upon the modification of peoples behaviour but do not at all address the food supply environment, not to mention the huge prohibitive cost of some such strategies. Trying to persuade a whole population to behave in various ways and resist the full range of foods on display is an enormous ask and sets up for failure. For many strategies once the novelty factor wears off failure is inevitable.

Do strategies exist that modify the consumable food environment, specifically the animal fat and food environment, prior to presenting to the consumer. These such strategies are more likely to succeed. If these strategies reduce the total amount of animal fat and food presented to the consumer then there will be much less need to require the population to change behaviour.

It is the total amount of animal fat presenting to the population and consumed that ultimately governs the average level of animal fat deposition in the population. A kind of settling point.

I have been taking the approach that primary prevention is best addressed by addressing the animal fat and food before it enters the consumable environment. Once animal fat and food enters the consumable environment in considerable amounts we have almost totally lost the battle to prevent the overweight/obesity problem. Here in Australia, like elsewhere, there is an over emphasis on behavioural modification strategies. Our focus and beliefs on prevention need to move away from behavioural modification to a truly preventative food industry regulation approach. Our government food regulator is Food Standards Australia New Zealand

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and it is well placed to do a lot of the food industry standards and regulation required.

The following article was sent to Nicola Roxon, then the opposition Health Minister, in February 2007.

rory poulter } wrote:
 Date: Mon, 12 Feb 2007
 From: rory poulter }
 Subject: Food for Thought
 To: nicola.roxon.mp@aph.gov.au

Tackling An Overweight Nation

I would like to see the food standards and regulatory environment as the primary preventative mechanism for addressing the continued population net weight gain problem in Australia.

For some time the focus and effort has been on seeing the individual as the problem and applying individual coaching solutions to the greater population on food consumption and physical activity behaviour. The problem is more to do with the dynamics of the greater population and addressing the input of animal fats into the greater population through the food industry. That is, reduce the input of animal fats into the greater population to a level at or below the threshold at which the greater population has a net weight gain outcome.

This can be achieved through the existing or modified food standards regulatory environment, or as a special adjunct. Examples can be having standards setting the maximum animal fat content for various food categories, such as: the confectionary food category requiring animal fat content to be less than 10%; the ice-cream subcategory less than 5% animal fat content; dairy product category less than 15%; dairy milk less than 5%; and so on.

More comprehensive strategies can be implemented such as accreditation and auditing of restaurants, chefs, fast food outlets, and food processors, much like the success of NATA developed in Australia and adopted worldwide.

Perhaps 10% or 20% or even more of animal fats can be captured and prevented from inputting to the greater population and contributing to the net weight gain of the population. This amount of animal fat need not be in our consumable food environment. It can be taken out of the picture entirely. The average levels of animal fat inputting and consumed by the population can be reduced to levels not seen since perhaps the 1970's or earlier decades. The task of preventing further weight gain and reducing the weight of the existing overweight population then becomes much easier.

Tackling the problem through industry is far more effective than trying alone to persuade or coerce a whole population into choosing better eating and physical activity habits in an increasingly consumer driven society with a greater availability and variety of relatively cheaper food.

Mythologies abound with regard to physical activity and food consumption behaviour. The majority of people cannot gain weight by having an exclusively plant based diet, being physically inactive, and having sugar laden soft drinks. The increasing weight of the population is almost exclusively caused by the increased consumption of animal fats and the corresponding accumulated deposition of these animal fats in the body. It is through the food industry that the population obtains and consumes most of its animal fats. It is the excessive increase inputting of animal fats into the population that needs to be focussed upon and addressed, not the over emphasis on the physical activity levels of the population.

About 95% of agricultural land use and half of agricultural water use is given over to the cattle and sheep fleet in this country. Tackling the overweight population problem through the industry removes much of the pressure from the consumer and the farmer to conform.

I marvel at the ever increasing number of days I have a clear view across the Melbourne suburbs to the mountains 70 kilometres away. Gone are the many days of brown smog of the 1970's through to the 1990's. Industry standards have greatly reduced visible particulate pollution inputting to the atmosphere from vehicle emissions and also stack emissions, despite the growth in vehicle use and gas emissions. And it has happened with most of us giving little thought or changing our behaviour. This is what industry standards can do. They have effectively removed visible particulate pollution that did not need to be in the atmosphere. What a revolution.

In 1996 the NHMRC working party reviewed the current understanding of the overweight and obesity problem in Australia. Recommendations and a strategic plan was made, the goal of which was to prevent further weight gain in adults and eventually reduce the proportion of the adult population that is overweight or obese, and also to ensure the healthy growth of children. The time frame for the implementation of the strategy was ten years. The emphasis of this strategic plan was comprehensive and involved promotion and education to the general population of physical activity and dietary guidelines for adults and children in the community,

schools and workplace; encouraging the food industry to increase the proportion of reduced fat food; involve the health care sector in the strategy; continue research; monitor and evaluate attributes of weight, physical activity and dietary intake in the population at regular intervals. Much of the strategy recommendations have been implemented in some form or other over the last decade, and in previous years, by various sectors and often as small pilot programs within states. Ten years on the growing consensus is that the outcome of these and other strategies is disappointing when viewed against the general population and future prospects. Many of these behavioural modification strategies suffer because of a lack of industry regulation strategies. Some industry processors offer reduced fat content options, but this can hardly be called self regulation. Imposed industry regulation is more likely to be required.

We are at a crossroads. Do we continue with these behavioural modification type strategies and hope for the best or do we try a different approach? We are already predicting dire consequences for the health of the population in the near future if we continue on our current journey. What we have been doing up until now is not working. The collective effort required to change behaviour is too great to overcome a growing tide of animal fats. The non-intervention wait and see approach of government means increasingly far too many people gaining weight and needlessly presenting with health problems and pre-mature death now and into the future.

For me the debate was over a decade ago. I hope to one day see an ever bigger smile from Paul Zimmet with his long standing work for the International Diabetes Institute.

Rory Poulter

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