

**Submission to the
Obesity Inquiry
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(Inq into Obesity)

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Directed To:

Inquiry Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing
Department of the House of Representatives

From:

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1. Summary

Significantly more men than women have a weight problem. There are important gender differences in the experience of overweight / obesity. Overweight men have greater overall health risks than overweight women particularly during middle age. Men are expressing motivators for change that are specific to their needs and values, while at the same time being largely unaware of some of the unique benefits to males of losing weight (eg improved sex, reduced urinary tract symptoms and reduced sleep problems).

Our understanding of effective approaches to marketing health messages to men and enabling men to make positive changes is still very basic. Most health education and awareness campaigns lack an effective gender appeal and do not attempt to reach out to men in their own environments. The Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health is currently attempting to address these issues by developing a male oriented obesity prevention program. This program, currently called *Waste Your Waist*, is designed to encourage healthy eating and physical activity through the well organised male fraternity of Freemasonry.

We recommend establishing a publicly funded program to foster the development of gender specific obesity prevention programs that tailor health promotion messages to a male audience and can demonstrate positive outcomes.

2. The Significance of a Gendered Approach to Obesity / Overweight

Significantly more men than women have a weight problem. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2008) reports that 60% of males are either obese (19%) or overweight (41%). Among females, 42% are either obese (17%) or overweight (25%). 58% of men report insufficient activity levels; 51% report insufficient fruit uptake; and 70% report insufficient vegetable uptake.

The Florey Adelaide Male Ageing Study (FAMAS), based at the Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health, The University of Adelaide is the only longitudinal study in Australia tracking a comprehensive range of men's health issues over time. In its first wave of data collection, the study revealed that 78.5% of study participants (males aged 35-80 years) were either overweight or obese; 44% got no exercise and 61% got insufficient exercise (Martin et al 2007).

There are important gender differences in the experience of overweight/obesity. Men lose weight faster than women – they have a higher resting metabolism and burn more calories during activity because they have relatively more muscle mass and heavier bones than women. Men are more likely to increase physical activity than change diet and are more likely to adopt a healthier lifestyle in response to a medical event. Large waist size is linked to erectile dysfunction and also low testosterone levels which in turn can lead to other problems including fatigue, mood changes, muscle loss and weaker bones.

Overweight men have greater overall health risks than overweight women, particularly during middle age. Men are more likely to carry excess weight around their abdomen which is riskier than weight around the hips and thighs. Overweight men tend to have more visceral fat (ie fat that surrounds the internal organs) which increases the risk of heart attack, metabolic syndrome and diabetes. Ischaemic heart disease is the leading cause of premature death among males (11.1% of potential life years lost) (AIHW 2009). A recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report on chronic disease and

participation in work revealed that males with chronic disease were more than twice as likely to not participate in the labour force compared to males without chronic disease (AIHW, 2009). Furthermore, males contributed about two thirds of the total absenteeism associated with chronic disease.

3. Motivators / Drivers of Change Specific to Men

Men express motivators / drivers for adopting a healthier lifestyle that are specific to their needs and values. For example, the AIHW (2009) reported on the main constraints and motivators for participation in sport and physical recreation for males and females. While the constraints were similar for men and women (principally insufficient time), there were significant differences in the motivators. Fewer men (49.6) than women (58.6%) indicated health and fitness were the main motivator for participation in sport and physical recreation; and more men (27.4%) than women (16.1%) reported enjoyment as the main motivator. And social/family reasons were reported as the reason for more men (8.4%) than women (5.5%); well being was reported by fewer men (6%) than women (8.8%).

In a series of focus groups recently conducted by the Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health, men were asked to rank the benefits of adopting a healthier lifestyle with interesting results. Prevention / improvement of serious health conditions was ranked most highly. More energy/more mobility, better mental health, and preserving independence were ranked in the mid-range by most of the men. And better sleep, better sex, and better work performance received consistently lower rankings among most of the men.

Most men are unaware that simply by losing weight some of their most immediately concerning health problems (eg sex and sleep) can be addressed. Researchers within the Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health are actively involved in projects that are demonstrating that weight loss among men improves sexual function, reduces lower urinary tract symptoms, and improves sleep and sleep related problems. This work is providing strong evidence for a natural and effective alternative to controversial drug treatments for these problems that will have other significant benefits as well. But recent social marketing campaigns have largely ignored the male specific benefits to losing weight.

4. Developing effective gendered approaches to preventing obesity/overweight

Our understanding of effective approaches to marketing health messages to men and enabling men to make positive changes is still very basic. With few notable exceptions (eg the excellent work of Andrology Australia), most health education and awareness campaigns lack an effective gender appeal. In addition, most public health campaigns do not attempt to reach out to men in their own environments.

The Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health is currently attempting to address these issues by developing a male oriented obesity prevention program. This program, currently called *Waste Your Waist*, is designed to encourage healthy eating and physical activity through the well organised male fraternity of Freemasonry. We are building on our partnership with Freemasonry to develop health education materials describing the specific benefits to men of adopting a healthy lifestyle and to deliver a structured program for change in a male setting. It will capitalise on the existing social networks, organisational structures and communication mechanisms of Freemasonry – in the recent past they have mobilised 30,000 men across Australasia to attend men's health awareness seminars. The program will be developed through a trained network of men's health coordinators across the country, but will not be

restricted to Freemasons. At the local level, their sons, grandsons, and neighbours and the community at large will be invited to participate. Men's health coordinators will promote and organise introductory seminars on the male specific implications of large waist size, and recruit participants to sign a pledge to participate in a 6-12 month supported intervention to improve eating habits and physical activity levels.

We are planning a rigorous evaluation of both process and outcomes associated with this innovative program. We are sharing experiences and learning from researchers in the USA who have been trialling similar approaches including: the *Men 4 Health* program, based at The University of Michigan and funded by the American Cancer Society; and the *Men as Navigators of Health* program based at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and funded by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Both of these programs are working with and through male organisations to develop and deliver health promotion programmes. **We recommend establishing a publicly funded program to foster the development of gender specific obesity prevention programs that tailor health promotion messages to a male audience and can demonstrate positive outcomes.**

5. About the Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health

The Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health is based at The University of Adelaide and was borne of a significant sponsorship from the Freemasons Foundation. The Freemasons Foundation provided funds to establish two new men's health research positions, the Freemasons Foundation Research Fellows. The University of Adelaide agreed to establish 6 PhD scholars, Freemasons Foundation PhD Scholars.

Our vision is to enable men to live longer, healthier, and happier lives. Our mission is to:

- pursue innovative research programs
- significantly improve health services
- deliver evidence based continuing education programs
- disseminate the latest health information and education resources.

Our first strategic plan, *Creating Our Future 2008-2012* articulates our ambition. By 2012, we aim to be a recognised world leader in men's health for the following reasons:

- The Centre will be a model of integration, and multidisciplinary collaboration, across clinical services, research programs and continuing education.
- The research programs of the Centre will be driven by its prospective cohort study (ie Florey Adelaide Male Ageing Study) and collaborations with clinical services.
- The Centre will attract and generate world leaders in men's health and have strong partnerships both nationally and internationally.
- The Centre will have a strong international reputation as a result of systematic dissemination of research discoveries.
- The Centre will have a diversified funding base including private funds, along with contract research funds, research grants and other government funds.

You can learn more about the Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health by visiting our website:
www.adelaide.edu.au/menshealth

References

- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008. *Australia's health 2008*. Cat. no. AUS 99. Canberra: AIHW.
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2009. *Chronic disease and participation in work*. Cat no. PHE 190. Canberra: AIHW.
- Martin S, Haren M, Taylor A, Middleton S, Wittert G and Members of the Florey Adelaide Male Ageing Study (2007). 'Cohort profile: the Florey Adelaide Male Ageing Study (FAMAS)', *International Journal of Epidemiology*. vol 36, no 2, pp.302-6.