

## Concluding remarks

- 7.1 There is no doubt that obesity presents a serious challenge to the health of Australians. In the course of this inquiry, the Committee has examined the future implications that obesity presents for Australia and the contribution that governments, industry, communities and individuals can all make to reverse the currently too high levels of overweight and obesity in this country. This report follows the story of the Committee's inquiry.
- 7.2 Obesity has grabbed the public's attention throughout 2008 and 2009. The almost daily references to obesity in the television and print media have raised awareness of the attendant issues. Many of the reports have presented a doom and gloom view. The Committee would like its report to show that there are grounds for optimism. There is an impetus within Australia to respond to obesity. There is energy and support within the community for action now.
- 7.3 The Committee looks forward to the release of the National Preventative Health Taskforce's (the Taskforce) *National Preventative Health Strategy* in late June 2009. The Committee believes that while the two processes, that of this inquiry and the Taskforce, may on the surface appear similar, there are in fact some differences. The Committee has had an opportunity to focus on personal stories as it visited communities and met individuals, while the Taskforce has had the expertise to draw on the technical and scientific aspects of preventative health practice in order to develop a comprehensive national prevention framework. The Committee hopes that our report will complement the Taskforce's evidence-based strategy by telling the human stories as seen through the eyes of individuals, families, health workers, the private sector, governments and communities all around Australia.
- 7.4 An over-arching theme of this report is the need for national leadership, with the Federal Government driving and/or supporting changes, to

address obesity across the spectrum of Australian society. Such leadership is required in order to develop a whole-of-society response to obesity, engaging with industry, non-government organisations, communities and different levels and portfolios of government. Government has the opportunity at this time to 'set the scene' and create the conditions for a comprehensive response to obesity within Australian society. In this respect, the Committee sees the value of the Taskforce's recommendation to establish a new stand-alone national agency for promoting health and preventing illness.

- 7.5 One of the major issues that has confronted the Committee throughout the inquiry, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 2, is the lack of up-to-date data about the rate of obesity, the nutritional intake of Australians and the level of physical activity within the community. This inadequate data makes it difficult to accurately determine the cost of obesity and the future implications for and costs to the health system. The Committee urges the Federal Government to undertake detailed economic modelling of the projected costs of obesity and interventions, similar to those proposed in the 2008 Foresight Report on obesity prevention and management in the United Kingdom. The Committee strongly supports plans to remedy the existing data gaps through an adults nutrition and physical activity survey, and the proposed biomedical health risks survey, and wants to see these initiatives not simply considered 'one-offs' but updated regularly and sustained over the long-term.
- 7.6 The role of governments at all levels in addressing obesity is central. Broadly, governments need to consider modifying urban planning requirements, using regulation and legislation as tools to drive changes to the food supply and improving the management and treatment of overweight and obesity in the health system. Obesity has been compared to climate change insofar as it is a major modern phenomenon which requires a multiplicity of responses from government. In this respect the Committee notes the United Kingdom's report, *Food Matters: Towards a Strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2008). The report can provide a useful conceptual and practical guide to nations like Australia for developing more integrated policies that deal with the long-term trends in food production, consumption, safety and nutrition impact on the health of citizens. The Committee hopes that the current global financial crisis does not distract the government from giving the issues of overweight and obesity, and preventative health the attention that they deserve.
- 7.7 There is no doubt that the private sector has made some positive steps to contribute to reducing the growing rates of obesity in Australia. Industry must be part of the solution to obesity in Australia, which is why the Committee has recommended that the Federal Government adopt an

approach similar to that of the United Kingdom whose *Healthy Food Code of Good Practice* challenges all sectors of the food industry to promote healthy eating. The Committee believes that the Federal Government and industry need to work together more collaboratively on these issues.

- 7.8 Individuals need to take responsibility for their own weight but the Committee notes that there are factors that impact on the ability of people to control their weight. These include biological factors, the obesogenic environment, psychological factors, lack of knowledge and/or education and socioeconomic factors. The Committee considers these issues to be a whole-of-society responsibility with redress falling to governments, communities, industry and individuals.
- 7.9 One of the most rewarding discoveries for Committee members as they travelled across Australia for public hearings and inspections has been to see first-hand the role that communities can and are currently playing in addressing the levels of obesity in Australia. Throughout the inquiry, the Committee has been impressed with the breadth and depth of activities that are having demonstrated success within communities.
- 7.10 While the community programs and partnerships the Committee witnessed throughout the inquiry are not the total solution to obesity in Australia, they make a positive contribution. Key to the successful programs are a sense of community ownership, involvement and connection, which the Committee believes will be integral to underscoring the Federal Government's strategy and government programs. The Committee has been impressed by the degree of community engagement it has seen in programs like the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program, the Colac intervention and the Hunter Illawarra Kids Challenge Using Parent Support (HIKCUPS) project, to name but a few. The Committee has enjoyed learning more about the different contributions that the various projects, programs and partnerships have made, and their often unforeseen flow-on benefits for healthier communities.
- 7.11 The Committee hopes that this report will move the debate surrounding obesity forward. While the Committee is of the view that the high levels of overweight and obesity are of very serious cause for concern and possibly even underestimated at the current time, there has been significant evidence that across Australia positive steps are being undertaken by governments, communities, individuals and industry.
- 7.12 There are many individuals who are working tirelessly in Australia to control their weight or help others to adopt healthier lifestyles. The Committee thanks the many doctors, specialists and allied health and community workers who took the time to attend public hearings and share their knowledge. These are the unsung heroes of the Australian

health system and the battle against overweight and obesity. The Committee is confident that the work it has witnessed, ranging from community programs to medical treatments, will serve to reinforce the strategy that is currently being devised by the Taskforce. The Committee appreciates the Taskforce's input into the inquiry and the opportunity to have discussions about policy options with the Taskforce Chair, members, and secretariat staff alike.

- 7.13 Evidence presented to the Committee highlights the fact that obesity is a real and pressing problem in need of a comprehensive and multifaceted solution. The Committee is confident that the public support for action which it has witnessed throughout the inquiry will contribute to the success of the Taskforce's strategy, and thinks that the public momentum for change should be captured and built upon. This drive has left the Committee feeling optimistic, rather than pessimistic, that the concerted effort of all sectors of Australian society can bring the public health issues of obesity under control and reduce the burden to Australian society and the economy.

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**Chair**  
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