



Alzheimer's
Australia
Living with dementia

AE 15/05/08

Mr Steve Georganas M.P.
Chair
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Mr Georganas

Re Inquiry into obesity in Australia

Alzheimer's Australia welcomes the inquiry into obesity in Australia and thanks you for the opportunity to provide comment.

Alzheimer's Australia is the peak body providing support and advocacy for the 270,000 Australians living with dementia and their families. Our mission is to provide leadership in dementia policy, risk reduction and services.

In 2005, Alzheimer's Australia launched **Mind your Mind**[®], a dementia risk reduction program. **Mind your Mind** is based on sound scientific evidence indicating that lifestyle factors such as keeping the brain active, eating healthily, being physically active, staying socially connected, not smoking, and managing blood pressure, blood cholesterol, blood sugars and weight, can reduce the risk of dementia.

Whilst health implications of obesity such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain cancers are well known, the impact of obesity on dementia is less well known. Obesity has been identified as a risk factor for vascular dementia¹ (which accounts for around 15 to 20% of dementia cases) and also for Alzheimer's disease (the most common form of dementia, accounting for around 50 to 70% of cases).

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A recent meta-analysis of studies examining associations between obesity and dementia found that obesity increased the relative risk of dementia by 42% when compared with normal weight². When looking specifically at Alzheimer's disease the increased risk was 80% and for vascular dementia, 73%. The exact relationship between obesity and dementia is not yet clear, however researchers at the Australian National University are currently reviewing the evidence to more clearly define the relationship. Results are expected later this year. There is, however, enough evidence to support educating people to achieve and maintain a healthy weight to help reduce their risk of dementia.

In considering the implications of obesity on Australia's health system it is vital for the inquiry to factor in the burden of dementia on the health system.

Dementia is a debilitating and currently non curable condition and will become the greatest source of disability burden in Australia by 2016³. It is expected that the current 1000 new cases of dementia every week will treble by 2050 to more than 3300 every week, and that the number of people with dementia will rise from 227,000 now to around 731,000⁴.

Dementia is the greatest single contributor to the burden of disease due to disability at older ages, as well as the greatest single contributor to the cost of care in residential aged care (AIHW 2004c) as cited in Australia's Health 2006⁵.

Dementia is particularly significant for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It is estimated that some 12.4% of Australians with dementia do not speak English at home (around one in eight)⁶.

There are also particular issues for indigenous communities. Research in the Kimberley region has established a dementia prevalence rate of 12.4% (45+ years) compared to 2.6% in the overall Australian population⁷.

In economic terms, Access Economics suggests that the total cost of dementia care in Australia in 2002 was \$6.6 billion and by mid century dementia costs may exceed 3% of GDP, from nearly 1% today³. Access economics predicted that if the average onset of Alzheimer's disease could be delayed by just five months from 2005, then by 2020 cumulative savings of \$1.3 billion would be realised and by 2040 \$6.6billion. If the onset of Alzheimer's disease was delayed by five years then by 2040 the savings would be \$67.5billion⁸. There is growing evidence that addressing risk factors such as obesity may achieve delayed onset of dementia.

Whilst Alzheimer's Australia is not expert in obesity, we are supportive of a long term comprehensive, multi sector, multi strategy approach to tackling obesity. We also strongly urge the government to consider a broader prevention approach. Obesity is not the only major public health problem in Australia, dementia and other chronic diseases are also significant and many are linked through common risk factors. It is our recommendation that health frameworks are developed to address all of the major public health issues, rather than just one or two at the neglect of others. We believe this would provide for greater efficiency of effort and resources and result in better outcomes for future health.

The resources of Alzheimer's Australia on **Mind your Mind**[®] and lifestyle, dementia and risk reduction can be accessed on <http://www.alzheimers.org.au/content.cfm?infoPagelId=2178>

Should you have any enquiries or wish to discuss this further, please contact me on 02 6254 4233.

Yours sincerely



Glenn Rees
National Executive Director

8th May 2008

References

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- 3 Access Economics (2003), *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia*, Alzheimer's Australia, Canberra.
- 4 Access Economics (2006), *Dementia estimates and projections: Australian States and Territories*, Alzheimer's Australia, Canberra.
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- 6 Access Economics (2006), *Dementia prevalence and incidence among Australians who do not speak English at home*, Alzheimer's Australia, Canberra.
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