

Inc 4/7/08
Submission No. 84
(Inq into Obesity)



Friday, May 16, 2008

The Secretary of the Committee on Health and Ageing
Mr James Catchpole
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Canberra
ACT 2600

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Dear James Catchpole,

Thank you for your letter dated April 7th 2008 inviting Nutrition Australia to make a submission for the *Inquiry into Obesity in Australia*. We congratulate the government on tackling the complex issue of obesity early in the term of the new Australian Government. Please find Nutrition Australia's submission attached.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or require further information.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "J Phillips", written over a light-colored circular stamp or watermark.

Jodi Phillips
Chief Executive Officer



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“Optimal health through food variety and physical activity”

Submission to the Inquiry into Obesity in Australia

Submission by the Australian Nutrition Foundation Inc. Trading as Nutrition Australia

Due Date: June 13th, 2008

To: The Secretary of the Committee on Health and Ageing
Mr James Catchpole

haa.reps@aph.gov.au Sent via email

PO Box 6021, Parliament House Canberra, ACT 2600

Terms of Reference: *the Committee will inquire into a report on the increasing prevalence of obesity in the Australian Population, focusing on the implications for Australia's health system.*

The Committee will recommend what governments, industry, individuals and the broader community can do to prevent and manage the obesity epidemic in children, youth and adults.

Summary:

Overweight and obesity is a major health and social issue in Australia. A range of strategies are required that will make it easier for individuals to make healthy food and lifestyle choices. A whole-of-society approach utilising a mix of legislative, education, health promotion and social marketing strategies is essential. Education alone is not enough, and although legislation in relation to food is highly contentious, it has proven to be a successful tool in other public health campaigns. Focusing education around food rather than nutrients and increasing food selection and food preparation skills at the individual, community and population level across a variety of settings will be the key to successful strategies and interventions to address overweight and obesity.

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"Optimal health through food variety and physical activity"

Section One: About Nutrition Australia

Nutrition Australia is a non profit, non government community nutrition education organisation and is the trading name of the Australian Nutrition Foundation Incorporated. Nutrition Australia has a 30 year history and is highly regarded as the independent voice of nutrition education in the community. The *Healthy Living Pyramid* and the *Body Mass Index* posters are simple tools widely used in nutrition education and are the intellectual property of Nutrition Australia. The Nutrition Australia website receives an average of 3,000,000 hits *per annum* with the most popular section of the website being *Frequently Asked Questions* and healthy menu plans.

Nutrition Australia is a member organisation dedicated to "*Optimal health through food variety and physical activity*". Nationally we work with individual members, community organisations, corporate partners and key stakeholders to promote evidence-based healthy living messages. Nutrition Australia provides programs to various community groups across the lifespan to promote healthy life choices in relation to healthy food selection and activity. Programs include: *Cooking for One and Two*, *Healthy Eating Schools*, food selection workshops for low socio-economic groups, supermarket tours, *Planning Meals for Less \$* and tailored community programs. All programs are based on community need and translate science into simple and practical messages for the community.

Mission:

The mission of the Australian Nutrition Foundation Inc. is to promote the health and well being of the Australian people by encouraging them to make informed food choices. This goal will be achieved by basing activities on scientific principles and knowledge related to human nutrition and dietetics, food science and technology.

Objectives:

- To act as a source of scientific information on key nutrition issues.
- To produce and disseminate material on nutrition to policy makers, the media, educators, food industry and consumers.
- To act as consultants to government departments, food industry and consumer groups as required on issues related to food and nutrition.
- To encourage innovation in the dissemination of nutritional knowledge.

Section Two: Scope of this Submission

Nutrition Australia conducts community programs and provides evidence-based nutrition education aimed at assisting all Australians to balance energy intake with energy expenditure - the key message for obesity prevention. However, the solution to the obesity epidemic is not that simple.



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Now well documented, the cause of population and individual obesity is complex and therefore requires multi-faceted solutions targeting individuals and the community across a variety of settings, as well as whole of population obesity prevention strategies.

As a health promotion charity, our focus is to provide Australians with tools to make informed healthier food choices. Nutrition Australia has been involved in nutrition education for 30 years over which time we have seen many changes to the food supply. Therefore, our role has evolved to meet the changing needs of Australians and places us in an optimal position to understand: what strategies have been successful at the community level across different settings; how new research and technologies may be utilised and how vulnerable groups may be targeted.

Nutrition Australia has expertise in the development and implementation of programs that are continually reviewed to meet the changing science and community needs and to reflect the program evaluation results.

The development of targeted food skills and food literacy skills at the individual, community and population levels is required to assist people with navigating their way through the plethora of foods and food messages that they are faced with in today's society. For education in this area to be effective an integrated, truly multi-sectorial and multi-strategy approach is required.

Nutrition Australia values discussion and debate on this complex issue but strongly advocates that action is required immediately. Many other organisations in Australia may be better positioned to comment on the economic consequences of this issue and current clinical research into overweight and obesity in Australia, so these issues will not be a major focus of this submission.

Section Three: The increasing prevalence of obesity in the Australian Population, focusing on the implications for Australia's health system

Obesity rates have been increasing for the past twenty years and are particularly high in Australia¹. The World Health Organisation has defined overweight and obesity particularly, in children, as one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century. Although there has been recent debate about the size of the issue, the prevalence has increased at an alarming rate globally² and in Australia³, and yet as a lifestyle disease, it is largely preventable.

Many reports nationally and internationally have shown that prevention of obesity and arresting current growth rates at a population level makes economic and social sense^{4,5}.

¹ ABS 2007 Australian Society Trends 2007, Overweight and Obesity. ABS Cat.NO.4101.0

² WHO 2000 Obesity : Preventing and Managing the Global epidemic WHO Technical Report Series 894

³ Heart Foundation 2007 Overweight and Obesity Useful Statistics and References July 2007

⁴ Who 2000 The World Health Report – Reducing risks promoting healthy life



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Nutrition Australia supports current public health nutrition recommendations made by many key Australian stakeholders including: the Australian Medical Association, the National Heart Foundation, Diabetes Australia, the Dietitians Association of Australia and the Parents Jury. The common public health recommendation is that a nationally coordinated, multi-sectorial approach is required and a variety of complementary strategies are needed incorporating, research, legislation, education and social marketing. It is important to acknowledge that individual behaviour change alone is not sufficient to address this issue. In developed, consumer driven countries like Australia the environment is considered obesigenic, therefore, environmental barriers to healthy eating and activity must also be addressed⁶. Strategies must target the population, communities, individuals and at risk and vulnerable groups. Strategies employed may be drawn from successful outcomes achieved in other public health campaigns such as smoking and skin cancer campaigns which combine legislation, education and social marketing. It has been argued that it is not appropriate to apply some of these strategies, in particular legislation, to food because food is necessary for life⁷. Nutrition Australia supports legislative restriction of food advertising to children and legislation that increases access to fruit and vegetables and promotes activity in the community. Such strategies are imperative to the success of national and community level education programs.

It is undeniable that the obesity rates have a considerable impact on, and will continue to burden our health care system⁸. It is generally well accepted that preventing obesity and arresting the current increase in incidence will provide highly significant economic benefits to Australia's health system⁹.

From a public health perspective, the importance of preventing overweight and obesity at the population level is paramount. Health risks associated with obesity have been well documented⁴. What is less well understood is the increased risk to mental health for individuals and communities associated with overweight and obesity. The social and food insecurity issues associated with the burdens of overweight and obesity are still to unravel. Nutrition Australia advocates for further investment into understanding these issues in greater depth.

⁵ Finkelstein, E.A., Ruhm, C.J., and. Kosa, K.M., 2004 “Economic causes and consequences of obesity” in *Annual Review of Public Health* Vol. 26: 239-257 (Volume publication date April 2005)

⁶ Swinburn B Egger, G and Raza, F.1999“Dissecting obesigenic environments; the development and application framework for identifying and prioritizing environmental interventions for obesity.”*Pre.Med* Dec 29 pp 563-70

⁷ Swinburn, B and Bell, C 2007 Obesity Prevention pp 201-222 in “Public Health Nutrition - from principles to Practice” edited by Lawrence M and Worsley, T. Allen and Unwin Publishers Australia

⁸ Access Economics, 2006. The economic costs of obesity. Report for Diabetes Australia, October 2006.

⁹ Julia Gillard, 2006. MP Shadow Minister for Health. “Prevention is the Cure”. National Press Club Speech, 2006



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Section Four: The Committee will recommend what governments, industry, individuals and the broader community can do to prevent and manage the obesity epidemic in children, youth and adults.

A whole-of-society response to obesity is required engaging all relevant stakeholders. A key focus needs to be removing environmental barriers to maintaining a healthy weight throughout the life cycle. This needs to occur at federal and state legislative levels. Legislation needs to be supported by national social marketing campaigns and targeted nutrition and physical activity education. Listed below are some of the key points that Nutrition Australia recommends need to be addressed from a community education perspective to help arrest the obesity epidemic.

Governments

- Coordination of a national whole-of-society approach aimed at maintaining a healthy weight and the prevention of overweight and obesity.
- Continue to fund research into the cause of obesity but also focus on effective community and public health initiatives in the prevention of obesity at a community and population level.
- Support health and education community organisations to deliver food and nutrition skill development workshops targeting different at-risk groups in a variety of settings.
- Implement curriculum directives that include food skill development and physical activity across the education system nationally.
- Develop strategies that promote and support a healthy food supply particularly in rural and remote areas and for vulnerable population groups.
- Conduct regular, rolling national surveys for healthy weight, activity and nutrition (a minimum of every five years).
- Develop and implement legislation that supports a healthy food environment utilising key components of successful public health strategies from other public health campaigns¹⁰.
- Develop and implement national multi-sectorial strategies that promote active transport and physical activity. These must incorporate collaborations between health and government town planning departments at the community, state and federal levels.
- Implementation of an 'on-pack' labelling scheme to assist consumers in making healthier food choices at the point of purchase (e.g. the traffic light system utilised in the United Kingdom¹¹). The obesity issue is a public health crisis and therefore requires strong government action in these areas and should not rely solely on industry-regulated initiatives.
- Funding public education regarding food choices including: understanding food labeling, information panels and recommended serves.

¹⁰ Chopra, M and Darton-Hill, I, 2004. “Tobacco and obesity epidemics: Not so different after all?” in *British Medical Journal*, vol. 328, no. 7455

¹¹ Food Standards Agency UK <http://www.eatwell.gov.uk/foodlabels/trafficlights/>



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Industry

- Implement guidelines and strategies across food retail and fast food industries for appropriate serving sizes of foods, particularly energy dense foods.
- Support evidence-based and consistent nutrition education messages that are not aligned with food industry products.
- Provide key stakeholders involved with obesity prevention, with greater accessibility to data available to the food industry in relation to knowledge, attitudes and perceptions about food in Australia.
- Increase accessibility of food sales data in Australia to key stakeholders working in obesity prevention.
- Increase the number and value of community partnerships aimed at increasing food preparation skills and knowledge and activity.
- Reward schemes promoting the purchase of nutrient dense foods such as whole foods at the base of the *Healthy Living Pyramid* e.g. a healthy food point's scheme.
- Implement evidence-based community nutrition education programs at the point of purchase.
- Understand and take responsibility for the potentially increased confusion that health claims and functional foods will create for consumers and particularly vulnerable groups.
- Significantly increase investment into research and development for the production of sustainable, minimally processed, nutrient dense foods.

Broader Community and individuals

Media and advertising:

- Ban food advertising to children initially with television food advertising and then to be followed by restrictions on other forms of media such as website games.
- Implement stricter, meaningful consequences if food advertising is misleading or contravenes the industry standards.
- Provide consistent messages in relation to obesity prevention through initiatives such as the Communications on Obesity Action for Child Health (COACH)¹² Project.
- Implement more Community Service Announcements (CSA'S) promoting consistent healthy lifestyle messages in relation to healthy eating and activity.
- Ensure tighter regulation of food advertising of less nutrient dense foods.

Schools

- Increase food literacy amongst children, parents and carers.
- Increase food preparation and cooking skills across the sector.
- Ensure national school canteen guidelines are implemented promptly.

¹² Wilde A. Gill T and Swinburn B. 2007 On behalf of The Communication on Obesity Action for Child Health (COACH) Reference Group. . Effective Communication on childhood obesity prevention by non-government organisations and agencies. PHASE 1. Developing consistent, clear and evidence-based messages. Sydney, ASSO.



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- Coordinate and support a national ongoing professional development program for teachers and other educators such as school-based youth health nurses in obesity prevention.
- Continue to support initiatives in schools that increase student knowledge and skills in the areas of healthy and environmentally sustainable food choices. The focus should be on the enjoyment and preparation of the range of whole foods available rather than on nutrient intake.
- Encourage the use of positive nutrition education messages in relation to food, the maintenance of a healthy weight, and the prevention of obesity.
- Consider putting food preparation and cooking skills back as a non-elective subject in the secondary school curriculum.

Parents

- Increase food literacy, food preparation and cooking skills - target through schools, work place, early childcare programs, play groups and maternity and child health nurses.
- Increase exposure to credible general nutrition and food skills through community health programs and centres.
- Provide regular, consistent, simple and positive health eating and healthy activity messages. Target through community groups such as places of worship, community centres, kindergartens, mothers groups and play groups.
- Continue the reinforcement and promotion of the importance of eating together as families and the role this plays in health - particularly in establishing strong healthy eating behaviors in children and in the mental health of children and adolescents.
- Increase access to credible, simple healthy eating tips, menu plans and food shopping tips through child and maternal health care nurses, schools and at point of purchase.
- Link healthy eating with sustainable eating in communications and workshops to parents.
- Utilise health insurance schemes to target parents and reward people for healthy food choices, being active and maintaining a healthy weight.

Workplace

- Increase access to healthy food in the work place; increase healthy lifestyle knowledge of employees and provide a workplace that promotes active lifestyles. This would be a wise investment for employers to promote productivity and the health of employees. Poor employee health is costing Australian business \$7 billion annually and \$25 billion from people presenting to work but not performing at full capacity due to general poor health¹³.

¹³ ABS Data 2004-05