

20 June 2008

Inquiry into Obesity in Australia
Standing Committee on Health and Ageing
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

RE: INQUIRY INTO OBESITY IN AUSTRALIA
Opportunities for the private sector to work with Government to reduce the burden of obesity on the Australian population

Australia has become a 'soft society'. We are more overweight than ever before, and society has also become more accepting of being overweight. **Each year almost 25,000 Australians die due to obesity-related disease or poor lifestyle.** This is not acceptable.

In 1980, 37% of the population was overweight or obese. In 2000 that number had grown to 56% of the population. By 2020 the prediction is that 3 out of every 4 Australian adults, or 75% of the nation, will be overweight or obese. This is not acceptable.

Government has an obligation to provide the Australian population with an environment that optimises health. And individuals have a responsibility to make their health a priority. To do this, they need support and innovation from the broader community, including the private sector.

Key Recommendations to the Committee

For the last 15 years, I have been intimately involved in the weight-loss industry both in Australia and overseas. I have developed successful commercial weight-loss programs, supported research initiatives into the management of overweight and obesity, lobbied government to increase awareness of the health risks associated with obesity and argued for incentives for members of the public to lose weight. More recently, I have set up my own business, SP Health Co, to develop best practice weight-loss products for the mass market.

As someone who has been overweight and now successfully manages their weight, I believe the severity of the obesity crisis requires the following measures to be taken:

1. Set a National Healthy Weight Target – a goal of '50:50 by 2020'.
2. Encourage partnerships between the public and private sectors to improve the quality of and access to 'best of breed' weight-loss programs.
3. Introduce a "Fat Tax" for energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and beverages.

These recommendations are expanded on below:



1. National Healthy Weight Target: 50:50 by 2020

In April 2008, I submitted a proposal to the 2020 Summit to consider a **National Healthy Weight Target of '50:50 by 2020'**. This means reducing the rates of overweight and obesity to 50% of the population, and improving the rates of healthy weight individuals to 50%, by 2020.

This target is realistic and achievable if population health strategies are implemented efficiently and effectively. Strategies need to be aimed at **preventing overweight and obesity** in children, adolescents, and healthy weight adults.

For those who are already overweight, we need to implement strategies that support their efforts to **improve lifestyle and achieve weight loss**. Rewards and incentives (rather than penalties) and back-to-basics education are necessary. For example:

- Cash incentives or Medicare / tax rebates to those Australians that maintain or achieve a healthy weight.
- Tax rebates for sporting fees and gym membership fees.
- Cash incentives or rebates for adults to attend healthy lifestyle group education sessions conducted by accredited health professionals.
- Compulsory lifestyle education within the school curriculum including cooking lessons for all Australian children which could include their parents.

2. Public/Private partnerships supported by the Government

The internet, mobile phones, social networking sites and 'Web 2.0' have revolutionized the way people consume information, and fundamentally changed the way they communicate with each other and interact with the broader community, including health professionals. The private sector is at the forefront of such changes, and is constantly adapting its product offerings to keep pace with the marketplace.

There is an opportunity for Government to partner with the private sector to deliver and/or distribute best practice, evidence-based weight-loss programs. This will help to diminish the prevalence of fad diets and ensure that all Australians have access to 'best of breed' quality-assured programs that are up-to-date and synergistic with public health initiatives. It will also provide the Government with invaluable intelligence on what Australians are doing/not doing to manage their weight, which will form the basis of a program of 'constant improvement'.

An example of a public/private partnership would be a National Weight Management Program sponsored by the Government and delivered by SP Health Co.

SP Health Co has developed an online weight management platform that has been used by ~20,000 Australians in just over 18 months. The platform is **based on the NHRMC guidelines** for management of overweight and obesity in adults, and has sound lifestyle information provided to members. Efficacy of this online weight management platform is currently being evaluated by researchers at the University of Newcastle.



The platform includes:

- **self-monitoring tools** including an online diary which allows people to record anthropometric measures (weight, waist, etc), energy intake and energy expenditure (i.e. what they eat and drink), blood pressure, blood glucose and other relevant information
- **a quality-assured food and exercise database** which is being upgraded to include advanced technology (which will not be discussed here due to its commercial sensitivity)
- **community forums** with peer-to-peer and group support mechanisms
- **a rewards systems** for success in weight loss and/or positive, proactive behaviours which contribute to weight management
- **back-to-basics education** on weight management, healthy eating and safe exercise routines.

A National Weight Management Program based on SP Health Co's existing platform could be endorsed by the Government or made available to high-risk people (i.e. those with a BMI of 27+) for free through a Medicare rebate.

3. Introduction of a "Fat Tax"

While public/private partnerships can make a major contribution, the obesity crisis cannot be fought by governments and individuals alone. The **food industry should also be held to account** over its promotion of energy dense, nutrient poor foods. People should be able to consume such foods on an occasional basis; however, due to the industry's contribution to the obesity crisis, the food industry should be made to **contribute financially to health education campaigns**, through a "Fat Tax". This could also be used to **subsidise fruit and vegetables** to make them more affordable for all Australians.

In summary, opportunities exist for the Australian Government to take a leadership position on obesity management by capitalizing on existing resources in the private sector, such as those developed by SP Health Co. This will deliver continuing education for all Australians and motivation to improve the weight of the population. If we work together, we can reverse the obesity crisis and achieve '50:50 by 2020'.

Thank you for considering this submission.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Scott Penn'.

SCOTT PENN
CHAIRMAN & CEO