

Election Priorities 2007

Nutrition and physical activity



The Cancer Council Australia calls on the next Australian Government to pre-empt a major increase in future cancer incidence and mortality in Australia through:

- a social marketing campaign as the centrepiece of an integrated national strategy to reverse the escalating obesity epidemic; and
- restrictions on junk food advertising targeting children.

Why the federal election is a timely opportunity for the next Australian Government to lead a coordinated national strategy to curb obesity

Obesity and overweight are a major cause of two of Australia's most prevalent cancers – colon cancer (11% attributed to obesity/overweight) and breast cancer in post-menopausal women (9%).¹ With obesity in young Australians trebling between 1985 and 1997,² we face a future surge in colon and breast cancer incidence and mortality. In addition, rarer cancers such as endometrial cancer (39% attributed to obesity and overweight) and oesophageal cancers (37%) are at risk of becoming common cancers as today's obese young adults, adolescents and children enter middle age.

We are at the start of a potential new cancer crisis in Australia; the next Australian Government must acknowledge the extent of the population-wide cancer risk posed by obesity by introducing appropriately strong measures to address the problem.

Social marketing

Social marketing programs have been highly effective in influencing positive changes in public behaviour to improve population health and safety in Australia. While there have been no long-term mass media campaigns aimed at reducing obesity to evaluate, the success of campaigns to reduce smoking and HIV/AIDS transmission³ makes a strong case for a coordinated national mass media campaign targeting obesity.

A comparable example is the National Tobacco Campaign of the late 1990s, which was run in partnership with all jurisdictions, combining social marketing with service delivery (e.g. Quit lines) and paying for itself three times over within its lifetime.⁴

The COAG Australian Better Health Initiative (ABHI), with its \$500 million funding package for a range of primary and population health programs, has laid a platform for the next Australian Government to lead in the introduction of a more structured, integrated national strategy to address the obesity epidemic.

The Cancer Council Australia calls on the next Australia Government to build on the commitment to ABHI by leading a coordinated intergovernmental approach to obesity, centred around a national social marketing campaign and supported by research, community programs, enhanced primary health care and policy reform.

Evidence shows that government investment in social marketing delivers substantially greater returns if supported by forward-thinking, evidence-based policy. Just as bans on tobacco advertising were pivotal to the success of other tobacco control measures in Australia over the past 30 years, food marketing reform is essential to maximising any government investment in reducing obesity (see following).

Prohibiting junk food advertising to children: the standout intervention

Three-quarters of obese children and adolescents are likely to become obese adults. So Australia's escalating childhood and adolescent obesity epidemic calls for decisive action, with the best available evidence showing restrictions on the advertising of junk food to children would be by far the most cost-effective intervention.

A comprehensive study published by the Victorian Government showed that precluding advertising of foods and beverages high in sugar and fat, from 7-8am and 3-9pm Monday to Friday and 6am to 1pm Saturday and Sunday, was by far the most cost-effective of 13 interventions assessed for reducing adolescent and childhood obesity.⁵ (Other interventions scoped included physical activity, educational and school canteens programs, drug therapy and gastric banding.)

Advertising restrictions are also the most direct and cost-beneficial intervention available to the next Australian Government, which could implement reform through the federal legislature to help ensure other interventions – e.g. social marketing; health checks; school, community and primary care programs to encourage healthy eating – deliver substantially greater returns on investment.

Recent research shows a significant correlation between junk food advertising and childhood obesity. In Quebec, Canada, and in Sweden, where advertising restrictions have been in place since 1991 and 1980 respectively, childhood obesity/overweight is significantly lower than in neighbouring areas with similar populations and economies.⁶ The recent Victorian Government study⁵ that recommended junk food advertising restrictions as the most cost-effective intervention was independently reviewed and used rigorous modelling based on the available evidence to present its findings.

Lessons from tobacco

Australia's phasing out of broadcast advertising of tobacco products in the mid-1970s was pivotal to the long-term success of the many other anti-smoking measures introduced over the past 30 years. On the same basis, investing in encouraging people to maintain a healthy body weight will only deliver optimal returns if government social marketing programs do not have to compete with far more powerful and extensive advertising encouraging unhealthy food choices.

The continually escalating impact of obesity suggests that junk food advertising restrictions will be a matter of when, not if. The next Australian Government is ideally placed to show historic leadership in addressing obesity, the public health crisis that in 2006 overtook smoking as the largest preventable cause of disease burden in Australia.⁷

¹ Bergstrom, Pisani, Tenet et al, Overweight as an avoidable cause of cancer in Europe, Int Journal of Cancer, 2001.

² Booth, Wake, Armstrong et al, The epidemiology of overweight and obesity among Australian children and adolescents, 1985-97, Aust NZ Journal of Public Health, 2001.

³ Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, Returns on investment in public health, an epidemiological and economic analysis, 2003.

⁴ Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Australia's National Tobacco Campaign evaluation report: volume three, 2004.

⁵ Victorian Department of Human Services, Assessing cost-effectiveness of obesity interventions in children and adolescents, 2006

⁶ Lobstein, Dobb, Evidence of a possible link between obesogenic food advertising and child overweight, Obesity Review, 2005.

⁷ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2006, Australia's health 2006.