



The University of Sydney
Nutrition Research Foundation

MEDIA RELEASE

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EXPERTS IDENTIFY POLICY ACTION ON CHILDHOOD OBESITY

Establishing obesity as a national health priority, accrediting family friendly workplaces and Medicare rebates for child health checks are among 14 urgent recommendations put forward by a group of Australia's leading specialists to tackle the childhood obesity epidemic in Australia.

The Sydney University Nutrition Research Foundation today released the recommendations of the Healthy Lifestyle Forum to Help Combat Childhood Obesity, held on 20th June 2007 in Parliament House Canberra.

The forum, hosted and chaired by Senator Guy Barnett brought together more than 60 concerned members of health care, academia, industry, public health and sport sectors to determine immediate steps to address the problem of overweight and obesity in Australia's youth.

Professor Ian Caterson, Deputy Chair of the Forum, has urged health policy makers to seize the opportunity to implement the actions outlined by the expert group.

"Although the range of possible measures is huge, the recommendations made are an excellent mix: they include new ideas but also bring some neglected ideas back into contention," he said.

Among recommendations are:

- Establishing obesity as a National Health Priority, including the formation of a national forum at Cabinet level comprising ministers from health, agriculture, education, treasury, trade and transport and CEOs from all related industry and retail areas, to determine a truly national response to the problem.

- The introduction of a new Medicare rebate item for a child health check linked to the existing immunisation schedule which would reach almost all Australian children and allow obesity or risk factors for obesity to be identified early and addressed.
- Accrediting ‘family-friendly’ workplaces by encouraging employers to promote health for children and their parents by providing education and opportunities for good nutrition and physical activity. Examples would include facilitating breast-feeding, providing flexible maternity/paternity leave, providing facilities for the storage/preparation of healthy food, providing healthy food options if food is available on site, and tax incentives for gym membership. Compliant employers would be recognised with a symbol displayed on their promotional materials and products.
- A national labelling system should be developed allowing everyone, whether they be a child or a parent, to understand whether a particular food product is good for them.
- Greater use should be made of a range of health professionals including GPs, nurses, midwives, dietitians, pharmacists and exercise physiologists to disseminate consistent nutrition and physical activity advice to families and care-givers for themselves and their children. Training for key professionals and provision of a user-friendly booklet have been identified as essential.
- Instigating a regular, frequent, long-term population monitoring system to provide accurate information about body measurements, nutritional intake and status, and physical activity and sedentariness for children around all of Australia. Monitoring provides better information to deal with and track the problem. If screening of children involving individual feedback is to be considered, further research needs to be undertaken into its benefits and harms and the effectiveness of subsequent intervention models.

Professor Caterson said, “The growing trend towards overweight and obesity in Australian youth from infancy to adolescence is a complex problem. It needs immediate action in multiple areas across prevention, treatment and management – there is no single ‘magic bullet’.”

The fourteen recommendations have been made across the areas of:

- Clinical/health care system
- Monitoring/benchmarking
- Infant and early childhood
- Schools and the wider community, and
- Industry and private sector solutions.

END

The full recommendations are available at:

<http://www.mmb.usyd.edu.au/nrf/media.php>

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