MEDIA RELEASE

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Tipping the Scales: We must halt obesity to save Australian lives

34 leading health orgs set out 8 urgent Fed Gov actions for first time

Thirty-four leading community, public health, medical and academic groups have today united for the first time to call for urgent Federal Government action to address Australia’s serious obesity problem.

In the ground-breaking new action plan, *Tipping the Scales*, the agencies identify eight clear, practical, evidence-based actions the Australian Federal Government must take to reduce the enormous strain excess weight and poor diets are having on the nation’s physical and economic health.

Led by the Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC) and Deakin University’s Global Obesity Centre (GLOBE), *Tipping the Scales* draws on national and international recommendations to highlight where action is required. Areas include:

1. Time-based restrictions on TV junk food advertising to kids
2. Set clear food reformulation targets
3. Make the Health Star Rating mandatory by July 2019
4. Develop a national active transport strategy
5. Fund weight-related public education campaigns
6. Introduce a 20% health levy on sugary drinks
7. Establish a national obesity taskforce
8. Develop and monitor national diet, physical activity and weight guidelines.

OPC Executive Manager Jane Martin said the eight definitive policy actions in *Tipping the Scales* addressed the elements of Australia’s environment which set individuals and families up for unhealthy lifestyles, rather than just focusing on treating the poor health outcomes associated with obesity.

“Sixty-three per cent of Australian adults and 27 per cent of our children are overweight or obese. This is not surprising when you look at our environment – our kids are bombarded with advertising for junk food, high-sugar drinks are cheaper than water, and sugar and saturated fat are hiding in so-called ‘healthy’ foods. Making a healthy choice has never been more difficult,” Ms Martin said.

“The annual cost of overweight and obesity in Australia in 2011-12 was estimated to be $8.6 billion in direct and indirect costs such as GP services, hospital care, absenteeism and government subsidies. But Australia still has no strategy to tackle our obesity problem. It just doesn’t make sense.

“Without action, the costs of obesity and poor diet to society will only continue to spiral upwards. The policies we have set out to tackle obesity therefore aim to not only reduce morbidity and mortality, but also improve wellbeing, bring vital benefits to the economy and set Australians up for a healthier future.”

Professor of Epidemiology and Equity in Public Health at Deakin University, Anna Peeters, said the 34 groups behind the report were refusing to let governments simply sit back and watch as growing numbers of Australians developed life-threatening weight and diet-related health problems.

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“For too long we have been sitting and waiting for obesity to somehow fix itself. In the obesogenic environment in which we live, this is not going to happen. In fact, if current trends continue, there will be approximately 1.75 million deaths in people over the age of 20 years caused by diseases linked to overweight and obesity, such as type 2 diabetes, cancer heart disease, between 2011-2050,” Professor Peeters said.

“Obesity poses such an immense threat to Australia’s physical and economic health that it needs its own, standalone prevention strategy if progress is to be made. There are policies which have been proven to work in other parts of the world and have the potential to work here, but they need to be implemented as part of a comprehensive approach by governments. And they need to be implemented now.

“More than thirty leading organisations have agreed on eight priorities needed to tackle obesity in Australia. We would like to work with the Federal Government to tackle this urgent issue and integrate these actions as part of a long-term coordinated approach.”

In addition to the costs to society, the burden of obesity is felt acutely by individuals and their families.

As a Professor of Women’s Health at Monash University and a physician, Professor Helena Teede sees mothers struggle daily with trying to achieve and sustain healthy lifestyles for themselves and their families, while having to deal with the adverse impact of unhealthy weight, especially during pregnancy.

“As a mother’s weight before pregnancy increases, so does the substantive health risk to both the mother and baby. Excess weight gain during pregnancy further adds to these risks and is a key driver of infertility, long-term obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes, while for the child, their risk of becoming overweight or obese and developing chronic diseases in later life greatly increases,” Professor Teede said.

“The women I see are generally desperate for help to improve their lifestyle and that of their families. They want to set themselves and their families up for healthy, long lives.

“Currently, there is a lot of blame placed on individuals with unhealthy diets and lifestyles seen as being due to individual and family discipline. Women from all backgrounds and walks of life struggle with little or no support to achieve this. It is vital that we as a community progress beyond placing all responsibility on the individual and work towards creating a policy context and a society that supports healthy choices and tips the scales towards obesity prevention to give Australian families a healthy start to life.”

The calls to action outlined in Tipping the Scales are endorsed by the following organisations:
Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance (which includes the Heart Foundation, Cancer Council Australia, Kidney Health Australia, Diabetes Australia and the Stroke Foundation), Australian Health Policy Collaboration (AHPC), Australian Medical Students’ Association (AMSA), Australian & New Zealand Obesity Society (ANZOS), Australasian Society of Lifestyle Medicine, Baker Heart & Diabetes Institute, CHOICE, Consumers Health Forum of Australia, Deakin University’s Global Obesity Centre (GLOBE), Institute For Physical Activity and Nutrition (IPAN), Monash Centre for Health, Research and Implementation (MCHRI), Livelightner, Menzies School of Health Research, The University of Melbourne’s Melbourne School of Population & Global Health, Melbourne Children’s (which includes The Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute and the University of Melbourne), the National Rural Health Alliance Inc, Nutrition Australia, Obesity Australia, Obesity Policy Coalition, Obesity Surgery Society of Australia & New Zealand, Parents’ Voice, Public Health Association of Australia and Sugar By Half.

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Download the *Tipping the Scales* action plan and snapshot at opc.org.au/tipping-the-scales

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2. Ibid.