

### "REALISTIC ABOUT OBESITY? FAT CHANCE!"

Australians are getting fatter and fatter. The statistics are stark and savage: up to 60% of adult Australians are either overweight or obese and exposed to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis and cancer. Furthermore, 7.5% of the total burden of disease and injury is attributed to obesity, and this cost the economy \$8.3 billion in 2008. The health care expenditure for diabetes is projected to increase fourfold by 2032.\*

Smoking, alcohol misuse and obesity are the "social killers" of the 21st century. The recent National Preventative Health Taskforce unambiguously urged the federal government to deal with these killers. In response, further antismoking measures have been enacted, but, surprisingly, alcohol misuse and the obesity epidemic are still not on the political radar.

The reason for society's weight explosion is not rocket science and essentially reflects a mismatch between caloric consumption and energy expenditure. In short, it reflects our society's penchant for nutrient-dense fast foods and reluctance to heed the advice of Joan Collins: "*The best exercise for losing weight is pushing yourself away from the table*".

But the question of why the recommendations of the National Preventative Health Taskforce have not prompted decisive political action remains puzzling. Could it reflect the fact that public health advocacy is overwhelmed by a range of complex commitments and a failure to prioritise diverse issues — ranging from obesity, mental health and cancer to Indigenous health — that are the responsibility of too many competing health silos? It is enough to make politicians dizzy! Or could it reflect vigorous lobbying by vested interests?

In any event, addressing the lifestyle illnesses caused by smoking, alcohol misuse and obesity with vigorous public health programs could prevent 800 000 premature deaths, as well as save billions in health care costs.

Perhaps our obesity inaction is best captured by the title of a recent editorial in the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* — "Realistic about obesity? Fat chance".



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\*Aust NZ J Public Health 2010; 34: 240-247.

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(*Med J Aust* 2010; 193: 5-7)

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