



Deakin scorecard shows states vary widely in obesity prevention efforts

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New South Wales is taking the most action of any Australian government to improve the healthiness of foods in school canteens and hospitals, while other states lag behind, according to Deakin University's report card on the status of Australia's obesity prevention policies.

The Food Policy Index, compiled by researchers at Deakin's Institute for Health Transformation in partnership with the Obesity Policy Coalition, assessed government progress toward implementing globally recommended policies for tackling obesity and creating healthier food environments.

The 2019 report provides an update on the first Index, released in February 2017, which found that huge variation in the implementation of nutrition policies across federal and state governments was diminishing Australia's efforts to address the obesity epidemic.

Since then, progress includes active monitoring by the NSW Government of the healthiness of food in school canteens, while in Western Australia the government has banned alcohol advertising on public transport, and the ACT Government has removed junk food ads from Canberra's bus network. In Victoria the government has improved healthiness of foods in sport and recreation facilities, and the Queensland Government plans to establish an agency focused exclusively on health promotion.

The report's lead author Associate Professor Gary Sacks said all states and territories needed a crackdown to ensure schools were a healthy place for every Australian child, no matter where they lived.

"There are really good policies around the country focused on making school canteens healthier, but not all schools follow the rules, there's no consistency," he said.

"It's the same story for other government-controlled settings like health services and community recreation facilities. The recommendations might be there but we need better monitoring and support systems to make sure they're actually getting implemented in a way that works.

"Governments must get better at making sure they're not just talking the talk, but walking the walk. All our schools, hospitals and community sporting grounds should be places where healthy food and drinks are the norm."

The latest report highlights states and territories that are leading the way, as well as those that are falling behind, in areas of obesity prevention including school canteens, food labelling, food retail, and food marketing. It also includes a priority list of what each government should be doing to progress these areas over the next two years.

Associate Professor Sacks said each government had made some progress since the first report, but this was varied.

"Obesity prevention is clearly at front of mind for our governments. Last year the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to work towards a national obesity strategy and they've just had the National Obesity Summit in February to progress these ideas," he said.

"Our report clearly identifies what should be included in a National Obesity Strategy, and the upcoming federal election brings the opportunity for both major political parties to commit new policies that will address the obesity epidemic head on. It's important that progress here does not stagnate. Summits and commitments are all well and good, but this year we need to see serious action."

Jane Martin, Executive Manager of the Obesity Policy Coalition and a partner in the research, said there had been commitment demonstrated at a state and federal level, but a piecemeal approach would not work to turn the tide of obesity in Australia.

"Finally, governments are starting to sit up and take notice of one of the biggest public health challenges of our time. What we need now is leadership and implementation," Ms Martin said.

“Good policies exist, but they are not being implemented in a coordinated way.”

Ms Martin said a consistent approach to limiting children’s exposure to junk food advertising and availability was a critical step all governments should take to tackle obesity rates.

“Children are flooded with junk food ads for unhealthy food on their walks to school, when they’re waiting for the train, and when they’re watching sport on TV,” Ms Martin said.

“It’s time that all levels of government take the steps required to protect our children from this relentless push to consume junk food. Governments control what goes on to the sides of the bus stops and the billboards at train stations. They can ensure these ads aren’t fuelling childhood obesity.

“Today’s report provides the blueprint for governments about what needs to change in order to make an impact. Tackling our children’s pervasive exposure to junk food marketing is one policy that needs to be a priority for all governments across Australia.”

The report will be presented to states and territories through the respective health ministers, to feed into the development of the National Obesity Strategy. The next progress review is due in 2021.

About the Obesity Policy Coalition

The OPC is a partnership between Cancer Council Victoria, Diabetes Victoria, VicHealth and the Global Obesity Centre at Deakin University, a World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Obesity Prevention. The OPC advocates for evidence-based policy and regulatory change to address overweight, obesity and unhealthy diets in Australia.

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