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Urgent Government action needed to tackle obesity tsunami, international expert tells obesity conference

Calls to tax fast food, limit TV advertising of junk food and upgrading food labelling are fiddling around the edges as attempts to tackle the obesity tsunami engulfing Australia, according to international diabetes and obesity expert, Professor Paul Zimmet.

Labelling such strategies as narrow sighted, Professor Zimmet said urgent and comprehensive action was needed now to lessen the increasing burden on the hospitals and acute health sector.

Professor Zimmet, who will give one of the keynote addresses at the Australian and New Zealand Obesity Society’s Annual Meeting in Sydney tomorrow (Thursday, 21 October), is calling for the Federal Government to act on the recommendations of the National Preventative Health Taskforce which prepared a wide-ranging action strategy in 2009 to tackle obesity.

Director Emeritus and Director of International Research at Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute, Professor Zimmet said without a comprehensive strategy that viewed obesity as an environmental and community issue – and not just an issue for individuals and parents - the obesity tsunami in Australia would go from bad to worse.

He said the increase in obesity amongst children and adolescents was driving increases in diabetes, sleep disturbances and potentially cancer, and was likely to see heart disease rates rise again despite falling rates in recent years.

Professor Zimmet, who formed part of the National Preventative Health Taskforce, said he was disappointed that the recommendations from this expert group had not been implemented or given greater priority while rates of obesity and diabetes continued to soar.

He was very concerned that the Rudd Government had put most of its focus on the acute and hospital sector and had not integrated the Preventative Health Taskforce and Primary Health Care reports into an integrated approach to tackling diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, cancer and other diseases that are costing the nation many billions of dollars.

"We need action and leadership now from the Government against the biggest epidemic (obesity and diabetes) that Australia has ever faced," Professor Zimmet said on the eve of this conference, which is themed "A Time for Change: Meeting the challenges of the future".

According to AusDiab, the national survey carried out by Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute, three in five adults (60 per cent) were either overweight or obese. Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare show that one in four children (25 per cent) aged 5-
17 years was overweight or obese in 2007-08. While the burden of type 2 diabetes – which is closely linked to obesity – is likely to become the leading causes of disease in Australia by 2023.

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