



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Obese Children

SPEECH

Monday, 3 March 2003

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Billson, Bruce, MP

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Mr BILLSON (Dunkley) (3.54 pm)—I rise to support the motion put before the House by the member for Sydney. The motion calls upon us to do two things: note the increase in the percentage of children who are overweight and obese, and promote measures to increase fitness and encourage healthy lifestyles amongst young people. The most recent estimates of the levels of excess weight in the adult population in Australia come from the 1999-2000 Australian diabetes, obesity and lifestyle study. According to that study, about seven million people—or 60 per cent of the adult population—were either overweight or obese and this rate has almost doubled since 1980. Sadly, the situation is similar for children and adolescents. Through a comparison of two national surveys conducted in 1985 and 1995, it was revealed that 20 to 25 per cent of children aged between five and 18 years were considered either overweight or obese. The figure has doubled in that 10-year period. The main issue from that is that the research suggests young people who are obese or overweight carry that condition into their adult life. We know of the huge health risks associated with persistent obesity in adult life and the significant long-term consequences for the individual and for the nation through additional health costs and the like. Obesity in childhood is also associated with high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, high triglyceride levels and high insulin levels. Type 2 diabetes, once thought of as an adult disease, is now appearing in children.

Thankfully, by recognising the positive initiatives that the member for Sydney referred to, there are a number of things that can be done. An excellent article on nutrition by Rosemary Stanton appeared in the 11 October 2002 edition of *Australian Doctor*. I am encouraged by some of the steps that have already been taken by the Howard government, including an integrated range of measures and initiatives to address the problem in a cross-sector way. There is no one silver bullet for this. There are many elements to a responsible strategy to address childhood obesity, a number of which are already being pursued by the government.

The national clinical guidelines for the management of excess weight and obesity in adults and children is an Australian first that provides doctors and health care professionals with some basic information and an evidence based guide on how best to manage and treat overweight people and obesity. There is also funding through the NHMRC to update the current dietary guidelines for adults, children and adolescents. The National Child Nutrition Program provides \$15 million in community grants to improve the nutrition and long-term eating patterns of children aged between one and 12 years. That project addresses some of the concerns the member for Sydney alluded to about the kinds of food and healthy lifestyle messages that are going out to children—not only in their own homes but also in places where others have a responsibility and an input into their care, management and wellbeing.

Programs for before and after school hours have been mentioned. Rosemary Stanton points to an audit of the type of food available through school canteens to children from kindergarten through to year 12. Quite rightly, she also tackles the issue of advertising. Frankly, I find it curious that the food industry does not accept that its advertising influences what children eat and drink and that those choices contribute to the rising incidence of obesity. If it is having no influence on the eating patterns of children, why is the industry advertising? It seems to be a given that something needs to be done. In my view, the General Practitioners Association has put forward some very interesting data.

There is a lot more I could say but, in the time available, let me point to a few things we could do. Two very forward-looking individuals in my electorate, Powell Cooper and Mark Luca, are trying to make healthy food spunky and cool in the eyes of young people. They are trying to counter some of those messages you see in the media that encourage children to eat junk food. My son knows that one junk food day a week is plenty. Maybe giving out the message that junk food or fun food is okay in moderation is an appropriate thing to do, but there is a lot of fun to be had eating healthy food. There are also some issues around encouraging access to drinking water—even making sure that our publicly funded facilities in schools and military installations are available for broader community use. We should provide resources and invest in those things. At the end of the day we need to get one big message out: a healthy lifestyle and healthy eating equals a better life and should be embraced by all. (*Time expired*)