

Thursday, 24 April 2008



Victorian Healthcare Association

For immediate release

Health Services Urged To Tackle Obesity Now, VHA says

Urgent action is required to tackle obesity and ensure healthy food choices are available at all vending machines and cafeterias throughout Victoria's public health system.

The Victorian Healthcare Association's (VHA) latest position statement – *Tackling Obesity – Healthy Foods and Food Labelling in Health Services* - rates obesity as a significant cause of death and disability in Australia.

VHA chief executive Trevor Carr says the public health system is ideally placed to role model positive eating habits and healthy lifestyle choices to help prevent chronic diseases, such as diabetes and some cancers.

As the peak body representing public health in Victoria, VHA calls on the State Government to introduce - as a matter of urgency - a healthy catering plan and nutritional guidelines for use in all public health services.

This plan would include a simple colour-coded nutritional guide for all food and drinks sold at public health services, both in cafeterias and from vending machines.

Mr Carr said limiting unhealthy food choices within a comprehensive health promoting framework provides a key opportunity in the fight against obesity.

"VHA believes Victorian health services can play a vital leadership role in ensuring their workforces and the community can access healthy food and drinks within all of its services and facilities," Mr Carr said.

"Poor food choices over a lifetime have significant impacts on the prevalence of diseases such as diabetes, categories of cancer such as colon and stomach cancers and stroke and cardiovascular disease."

Among the urgent measures needed to tackle obesity, VHA recommends:

- The introduction of a simple colour-coded food labelling system by the Department of Human Services (DHS) to help people select healthy food and drink options.
- Healthy food is made available at all health service vending machines and cafeterias and DHS investigates vending machine policies in other states.
- Competitive pricing of healthy food options, with healthy choices possibly subsidised by government.
- Ongoing training of health professionals, including GPs, dieticians and practice nurses, on the benefits of a healthy diet and exercise so health professionals can role model healthy choices.
- DHS holds a State-wide forum to promote a "whole of government" approach to the health needs of Victorians.

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A “traffic light” system of food labelling in health facilities is working already in Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales, with South Australia set to follow.

Mr Carr believes a similar system must be made mandatory in all Victorian public health services with its introduction overseen by the state government.

The “traffic light” system encourages healthy eating by identifying foods and drinks that should be consumed daily with a green label. An amber label is for foods and drinks with some nutritional value but intake should be limited; and red is for energy dense and nutrient poor products that are not recommended.

Mr Carr said the new food strategy should try to ensure profits for health services and vending machine companies are maintained, but not at the expense of good public health outcomes.

“Vending machine snacks are a prime example of convenience foods that are pervasive in community settings such as hospitals,” Mr Carr said.

“Not only are the vending machines widespread, but the food choices are largely high in fat and sugar.”

Obesity is now rated as a “National Health Priority Area” by the federal government following the most recent meeting of Australian health ministers. That places obesity alongside cancer, heart disease and diabetes as critical issues facing Australia’s healthcare system.

The DHS Victorian Population Health Survey 2006 found about half of all Victorian adults is either overweight or obese. Based on a body mass index measure more than 30 per cent of the state’s adults are overweight and a further 15 per cent are obese.

For a full copy of the VHA Position Statement – Tackling Obesity – Healthy Foods and Food Labelling in Health Services – go to www.vha.org.au.

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