



Victorian Healthcare Association



TACKLING OBESITY: HEALTHY FOOD LABELLING IN VICTORIA'S HEALTH SERVICES —VHA BOARD ENDORSED POSITION STATEMENT 200801—

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Victorian Healthcare Association's (VHA) latest position statement encourages the widespread availability of healthy eating options in the public health system. It calls on the Victorian Government to introduce a simple colour-coded nutritional guide for all food and drinks sold at public hospital and health service cafeterias and vending machines.

Victoria lags behind other states such as Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales which have in place a "traffic light" system of food labeling to make it easy for consumers to identify healthy food and beverage options in our public hospitals. Obesity is a major cause of preventable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers. Figures from the National Obesity Taskforce indicate about 60 per cent of Australians are overweight or obese.

PREVENTING OBESITY

Availability of healthier choices and improving the nutritional values of foods has been shown to improve dietary behaviour. Obesity is now the most frequent cause of death and disability in Australia. In addition, the 7 national health priority areas -cardiovascular disease, cancer, mental health, injury, diabetes, asthma and musculoskeletal disorders- account for about 70 per cent of Victoria's total burden of disease and injury (DHS 2005). Obesity ranks second as a cause of premature death and disability in Victoria.

POLICY CONTEXT

In 2006, the State Government (DHS, 2005) promised healthy choices in hospital vending machines. Its policy stated that healthy catering and nutrition guidelines would be introduced **at all public hospitals** and included the possibility of extending this to other government agencies, such as community health centres, residential care services and prisons. VHA is concerned that this commitment is yet to be implemented.

PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Prevention and early intervention have been demonstrated as the most effective methods for addressing obesity and associated illnesses. However, the pervasive nature of food marketing and product placement within society should not be underestimated, nor should it undermine good health. Through its *Whole of Health* Position Statement, VHA advocates for a population health approach to incorporate the determinants of health. Ansari et al (2003) believe the most effective changes in health status outcomes are achieved through changes to the social determinants of health. A key to improving population health lies in modifying the environment in which interactions occur. The health system is ideally placed to role model healthy eating and lifestyle options. Too often vending machines stock unhealthy choices when the physical environment of health services should support and improve patient health.

VHA'S POSITION

Food marketing is significant in encouraging a healthy lifestyle, particularly the ready-to-eat food purchased in hospital environments. As institutions responsible for public health, VHA believes hospitals are prime stakeholders in promoting good health to prevent a myriad diseases caused by poor nutrition. Chronic disease continues to have a disproportionately high influence on the health of Victorians and VHA feels it is necessary to create environments that promote and positively influence good health outcomes.

HEALTH SERVICES

"The most basic requirement, which affects all the patients and staff of the hospital, is that the physical environment should not damage their health" (Hancock 1999).

There are several major impediments to a health promoting environment in Victoria's public health facilities. First is the widespread availability of unhealthy choices; second is the shortage of healthy alternatives; and third is the absence of a simple food labelling system to encourage healthy choices. Any reorientation of health services towards prevention should make healthy food the easy choice.

Supportive environments help people make healthy, informed choices and are important in promoting good nutrition (Hancock 1999; Zimmet and James 2006). Food packaging labels provide important consumer information at the point of sale and play a vital role in improving diets (Mhurchu and Gorton 2007). Such labels are useful only if presented in a way readily understood by consumers.

As community institutions, hospitals and health facilities place the health of the population as their core purpose. They must focus on creating physical, mental and social environments that are good for the health of their patients and staff, while being organisationally effective and environmentally responsible corporate citizens (Hancock 1999). But this requires the legislative support and the funding assistance of government.

RECOMMENDATIONS: A TEN POINT PLAN OF ACTION

1. DHS monitors the nutritional content of available food and drink options and introduces a colour-coded healthy choices labelling system based on quantitative methodology;
2. That this simple, colour-coded system is established by government and implemented in health services to enable patients, visitors and staff to quickly identify healthier snacks and beverages;
3. Hospitals ensure healthy food options are widely available in cafeteria and vending machines;
4. Ongoing training of health professionals, including dietitians, practice nurses and general practitioners (GPs) on the principles and benefits of a healthy diet and exercise patterns;
5. Pricing strategies are developed to make healthy food choices more economically attractive;
6. Hospitals adopt a 'whole hospital approach' to nutrition, based on health promoting hospital frameworks to improve general health outcomes;
7. DHS consult with the health and nutritional sectors to determine how to use vending machines as an avenue for reinforcing positive messages about nutrition and healthy eating;
8. DHS consider investigating the impact of vending machine policies in New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD) and Western Australia (WA) and any interim outcomes that may be significant;
9. DHS and stakeholders deliver an approach that maintains profits for hospitals and vending companies but does not put short-term profit before the health of staff and visitors.
10. VHA believes DHS should hold a State-wide health-promoting health services forum as part of a "whole of government" approach to the health needs of the Victorian community.

The full position statement and references are available on the VHA website: <http://www.vha.org.au>

