

Submission



Australian Physiotherapy Association

**Feedback on *Australia: The Healthiest
Country by 2020***

**Presented to the
National Preventative Health Taskforce**

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AUSTRALIAN PHYSIOTHERAPY ASSOCIATION

Executive Summary

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) welcomes the Australian Government's interest in preventative health and is pleased to respond to the call for submissions by the National Preventative Health Taskforce.

The number of people in Australia who are overweight or obese is rapidly increasing and the APA recognises this rising prevalence of obesity to be a matter of national concern requiring immediate priority action.

Stakeholders across governments and industry sectors must collaborate on an agreed statement of principles that promotes a nationally-coordinated response so that there can be meaningful action to address this issue during the next 12 months.

As part of a broad strategy for change, the APA recommends that an empirically-based target for increased activity be set for achievement by 2020; with the achievement of this target to be supported by a weight and exercise management resource kit made available to all Australian households.

Furthermore, high-risk groups should be better supported to access safe, effective and affordable exercise and weight management programs designed to address obesity and overweight, possibly via a revision of the Enhanced Primary Care items in the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

Physiotherapists have an important role to play in supporting either high-risk groups or those within healthy weight ranges; and are well-placed to help key players and stakeholders to deliver on this initiative. They possess specialised knowledge of pathology, the human body and of exercise management. Physiotherapy treatments and management techniques are holistic and client-centred, promoting self-management and facilitating personal empowerment that is integral to effective weight and exercise management.

Australian Physiotherapy Association

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) is the peak body representing the interests of Australian physiotherapists and their patients. The APA is a national organisation with state and territory branches and specialty subgroups. The APA corporate structure is one of a company limited by guarantee. The organisation has approximately 12,000 members, some 70 staff and over 300 members in volunteer positions on committees and working parties. The APA is governed by a Board of Directors elected by representatives of all stakeholder groups within the Association.

The APA vision is that all Australians will have access to quality physiotherapy, when and where required, to optimise health and wellbeing. The APA has a Platform and Vision for Physiotherapy 2020 and its current submissions are publicly available via the APA website www.physiotherapy.asn.au.



Feedback on *Australia: The Healthiest Country by 2020*

1. What is a realistic target for 2020?

The APA agrees that the most realistic target for 2020 would be to aim for an outcome that halts and reverses the rise in overweight and obesity in the Australian population. We recognise that this problem has been escalating over the past three decades and therefore the target has to be achievable.

As the National Preventative Health Task Force Discussion Paper points out, for those who are obese, health outcomes can be significantly improved through a 'modest loss of 5-10% of body weight'.¹ In combination with improving nutritional intake, there is a need to address the risks of increasingly sedentary lifestyles among Australians² and involve them in a higher level of daily physical activity.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day to improve and maintain good health.³ Nutrition Australia adds that these 30 minutes should ideally be of moderate physical activity (such as brisk walking) and be in addition to the low level and incidental physical activity accumulated throughout the course of the day.⁴

The APA recommends that, once a baseline measure of current population activity levels is determined, a realistic population target must be set for 2020. At a minimum this is likely to be 30 minutes of daily physical activity (starting with 3 blocks of 10 minute low intensity activity). One approach to help motivate and enable Australians to meet these targets could be the provision of toolkits to every household. These toolkits could contain pedometers and resources informing the public of the benefits of meeting the minimum levels of daily physical activity, and providing advice and guidance on ways to adopt healthier lifestyle choices. Such a resource should be designed to encourage people to better self-manage and evaluate their own progress.

The APA recommends:

That, once a baseline measurement for physical activity has been undertaken, a target for increased activity be set for achievement by 2020 and then supported by a weight and exercise management resource kit, which will be made available to all Australian households.

2. How can key players be engaged from the outset?

The burden of diseases caused by obesity was estimated to have cost the Australian society and government some \$58.2 billion in 2008⁵ and this figure is expected to continue growing.

The APA contends that obesity is a national emergency, and that urgent national action is needed across the three levels of government (i.e., local, state and federal), across industry sectors (e.g., health, education, taxation, urban planning) and other partners, such as food manufacturers.

In order to maximise changes, these key players and stakeholders must work collaboratively on a statement of principles for action and design a nationally coordinated response to address the issue of obesity that involves governments, the health care workforce, educators and industry.

The APA recommends:

That stakeholders across governments and industry sectors collaborate on an agreed statement of principles that promotes a nationally coordinated response to halting and reversing the incidence of obesity and overweight in the Australian population.

3. What is the best combination of ‘learning by doing’ and, at the same time, building the evidence base?

The APA agrees that it is necessary to build a strong evidence base to support action and intervention, while ensuring that obesity is treated as a priority issue that requires urgent and immediate action.

The APA recommends that programs should be developed following an action research model. All programs should incorporate formative evaluation processes that seek ongoing feedback from participants. Of course, as programs are developed through this process, the long-term target must be kept in mind to ensure a consistent focus in the strategy for national action.

The APA recommends:

That all new programs targeting obesity and overweight incorporate formative evaluation processes that seek ongoing feedback from participants.

4. What can individuals and families do to be physically active, eat well and maintain healthy body weights?

Ultimately, any behaviour changes rest with individuals. Any approach, therefore, must empower individuals and families to make changes that ideally incorporate a holistic vision of living that involves participation in frequent physical activity, maintaining healthy body weight and a good diet, and developing healthy lifestyle habits both at home and in the workplace or school.

The APA recommends that individuals and families be supported to pursue a healthy lifestyle through the provision of pedometers to every household, together with a resource guide that provides motivational advice and resources to understand the value of meeting daily targets.

Studies have suggested that, coupled with a personal coaching intervention, the use of a pedometer as a tool for motivational feedback encourages participants to meet their targets of daily physical activity.^{6,7}

The APA recommends:

That individuals and families be supported to pursue a healthy lifestyle through healthy diets and frequent participation in physical activity, and be aided by the provision of pedometers and a resource guide to every household.

5. In what ways can high-risk groups be supported?

High-risk groups⁸ often find the Australian health care system complex to navigate and avoid engaging the system or are simply denied access to it. They may also possess a very different understanding of health and well-being; ways to encourage health literacy may differ between those appropriate for the mainstream population and those appropriate for the high-risk groups. The APA believes that members of high-risk groups require advocates that can help guide them through the system to find appropriate treatment and services.

Physiotherapists are well-placed to work directly with high-risk groups — whether in primary, secondary or tertiary settings — having knowledge and understanding of the complexities of co-morbidities and trained in designing programs that respond to these complications, and being able to provide a client-centred approach that allows programs to take into consideration the challenges facing these groups.

They can also develop individualised programs monitoring and preventing overweight and obesity, as well as assist clients with exercise and weight management advice, encouraging improved health literacy and supporting the individual's ongoing capacity to self-manage. They are able to recommend safe and effective exercise and weight management programs and can play an integral role in multidisciplinary team approaches.

A review of the Enhanced Primary Care items in the Medicare Benefits Schedule that allowed disadvantaged Australians of all ages who are obese or at high-risk of obesity to access physiotherapy-led weight and exercise management programs would help to address the current access issues for these high-risk groups.

The APA recommends:

That high-risk groups be better supported to access safe, effective and affordable exercise and weight management programs designed to address obesity and overweight. One possible way in which access could be achieved is through a revision of the Enhanced Primary Care items in the Medicare Benefits Schedule.

6. Are the priorities for action appropriate?

The APA commends the Taskforce for the priorities that have been identified to address rising overweight and obesity in Australia. However, it is necessary for Australia to commit to these strategies and produce meaningful action to address these issues during the next 12 months.

Urban planners should begin by working closely with the community in designing safer streets, more green spaces, and better foot and bike paths to encourage and facilitate physical activity.

The APA contends that physiotherapists have an important role to play and are well-placed to help key stakeholders to deliver on this initiative. They possess specialised knowledge of the human body, pathology and exercise management, and mechanisms should be explored and reviewed to better integrate these skills into multi-disciplinary health care teams. Physiotherapy treatments and management techniques are holistic and client-centred, promoting self-management and facilitating personal empowerment that is integral to effective weight and exercise management.

References

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