

THE OBESITY COLLECTIVE



Media release - 4 March 2021

New guidelines critical to Australia's battle against obesity

Australia's fight to control soaring obesity numbers is being hamstrung by a lack of up-to-date and effective clinical practice guidelines, prompting an alliance of health professionals and experts to call for urgent action.

The call for action – issued **today** on World Obesity Day – comes amid warnings that COVID-19 is amplifying the impacts of obesity, with restrictions and economic impacts accompanying the pandemic making it more difficult for people to seek treatment and manage their health and weight.

Despite the number of people living with obesity more than doubling in Australia over the past decade, doctors and health professionals have been working without the support of national guidelines on how to assess, help and manage people since earlier guidelines lapsed in 2018.

Louise Baur, Paediatrician and Professor of Child and Adolescent Health at the University of Sydney and President Elect for the World Obesity Federation said new guidelines were critical to guide clinical healthcare and ensure the best evidence was adopted for weight management.

"We are basically fighting the obesity challenge with one hand tied behind our back," she said. "People who take that brave first step to see a doctor or other health professional about their weight need the best advice and support, but there is a serious lack of guidance for clinicians at the moment.

"While some people joke about 'covid kilos', the pandemic has aggravated weight issues for many Australians. Now that the vaccine is here, we need to shift some of our focus to tackling obesity as one of the most expensive but preventable health problems we face.

"No single approach to weight management will work for everyone and we need to recognise the powerful role that stigma plays, as well as environmental factors. Without a suite of evidence-based options in the formal framework of clinical guidelines, we risk increasing the opportunity for misinformation, confusion and dangerous diets."

Today almost two thirds of adults and up to a quarter of Australian children are overweight or living with obesity. The number of people living with obesity has nearly doubled from 2.7 million in 2007-08 to over 6 million people today.

Melbourne mother Kelly Cooper, who has spent most of her life living with obesity, joined the call for urgent action. Ms Cooper said her personal battles with her weight had driven her to complete a nutrition science degree so she could use her experience and skills to help others.

"Long after people have stopped calling me fat, labels like that still affect how I think of myself and are still part of my fabric," she said. "I know the hardest part is

keeping the weight off. That's one of the reasons why we need up-to-date, evidence-based guidelines, so health professionals have a clear pathway to support people."

The need for new Clinical Practice Guidelines is supported by groups including the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, the Australian Diabetes Society, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, the Weight Issues Network and the Charles Perkins Centre at the University of Sydney.

Obesity affects all sections of society, but equity is a major issue with higher rates in communities with relative socio-economic disadvantage, regional and remote areas, people with lower levels of education attainment and among Indigenous Australians.

Obesity Collective director Tiffany Petre said the lack of guidelines meant many clinicians were not initiating conversations with people or not providing detailed, person-centred guidance options for losing weight.

"A lot has changed since Australia's last set of clinical guidelines were released, with considerably more evidence around obesity management and health improvement approaches," she said.

"Technological developments such as apps and telehealth also need to be incorporated. Australia can build on the strong work which is occurring internationally, such as Canada's excellent Adult Obesity Clinical Practice Guidelines which were released last year."