



EMBARGO 12.01AM AEST Saturday 1 May 2021

Saturday 1 May, 2021

COVID-19 a “call to arms” for action on obesity, conference hears

Evidence linking obesity with COVID-19 complications has prompted a leading Australian epidemiologist to call on state and federal governments to fast track the country’s first national obesity strategy.

Professor Anna Peeters, Director, Institute for Health Transformation at Deakin University and Professor of Epidemiology and Equity in Public Health, said Australia’s swift response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 from governments, businesses and the community provided the ideal blueprint for national action on obesity.

“There’s even more opportunity now to move on an obesity strategy in light of what we know about COVID-19 and the fact that people living with obesity are at greater risk of being seriously ill, and dying, from COVID-19. Obesity is a known risk factor and we know that people who live with obesity need to be better protected because they are more at risk,” Professor Peeters said.

“The response from governments, business and the community to COVID-19 in early 2020 showed that we can work together to find a solution. The initial Australian response to the pandemic could really be seen as the ideal blueprint for action on obesity. We have shown we can do it if we want to.”

Professor Peeters is a guest speaker at the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists’ (ANZCA) 2021 Virtual Annual Scientific Meeting in Melbourne on Saturday 1 May. More than 2000 Australian, New Zealand and international anaesthetists and specialist pain medicine physicians have registered for the meeting from 30 April to 4 May.

Professor Peeters said discussions around the national obesity strategy had started before the pandemic and now was the time to proceed with the next stage of action.

She said while COVID-19 had delayed progress on Australia’s Health Council (formerly COAG Health Council) plans to develop a national obesity strategy, the experience in the UK had shown that health concerns about the links between COVID-19 and obesity could spur the introduction of new measures to reduce obesity.

Professor Peeters noted that the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson launched a national obesity strategy in July last year after he was hospitalised with COVID-19.

“It was a direct response to his illness and the likelihood that obesity is contributing to excess harm and excess health costs,” she explained.

“He was quite open about the fact that he was overweight when he was admitted to hospital with COVID-19. Three months later he announced the next stage of the UK obesity strategy, which includes some really strong measures including legislation to restrict ‘buy one, get one free’ price promotions by banning their advertising at supermarket checkouts and entrances. This is a big issue in Australia because we have a lot of price promotion on unhealthy food. But the UK is so

much further on than where we are here and this shows that COVID-19 can in fact be a real call to arms for action.

“COVID-19 reinforced the need for a quick acting obesity strategy in the UK and that’s why they went further than originally planned. They have already introduced a sugar tax on drinks and they already have television marketing restrictions and they’re now looking into whether they can go further with digital and online marketing restrictions. COVID-19 has actually accelerated the obesity strategy in the UK.”

According to Australian Institute of Health and Welfare data presented by Professor Peeters at the meeting:

- 38 per cent of adults in the lowest socio economic areas were obese in 2017 compared to 24 per cent for those living in the highest socio economic areas.
- 38 per cent of Indigenous children and adolescents were obese in 2018/19, an increase from 31 per cent in 2011/13.
- One in four children and adolescents aged between 2 and 17 were overweight or obese in 2018/19.

“Obesity is one of the most important issues facing Australia,” Professor Peeters said.

“Our rates are high and even higher in groups that are already disadvantaged and high risk and they are continuing to increase. We have had discussions around obesity for a long time but we haven’t really done anything in Australia that has put a brake on the increasing rates.”

For more information or to request interviews, please contact ANZCA Media Manager Carolyn Jones on +61 3 8517 5303, +61 408 259 369 or cjones@anzca.edu.au