

Obesity is now more deadly than smoking

AMY CORDEROY in the Sydney Morning Herald

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OBESITY has overtaken smoking as the leading cause of premature death and illness in Australia, as experts say the federal government is woefully unprepared for a tsunami of weight-related health problems.

Fat was rapidly becoming the biggest public health challenge Australia had to face, said the president of the Public Health Association of Australia, Mike Daube, who is also the deputy chairman of the government's National Preventative Health Taskforce.

New figures from Western Australia, which are expected to be echoed across Australia, show the contribution of excessive weight to ill health has more than doubled in just six years, and by 2006 accounted for 8.7 per cent of all disease. Tobacco's role has fallen by a quarter, and now causes 6.5 per cent of illness and early death.

"The obesity crisis is not on its way - it is already here," Professor Daube said. "What we have done about obesity is not working. This issue needs concentrated and determined action."

He said that while the federal government had done more than its predecessors there was an urgent need for the issue to be high on the agenda of the Council of Australian Governments meeting in Canberra on April 19.

"Our political leaders should be considering not only improvements to the hospital system but how to stop literally hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths," he said.

The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, has signalled he will use the COAG meeting to push the states to accept his hospital reform plan. Critics have said it might not work well for complex diseases such as those caused by obesity, which is linked to increased rates of diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

More than 60 per cent of Australian adults and one in four children are overweight or obese.

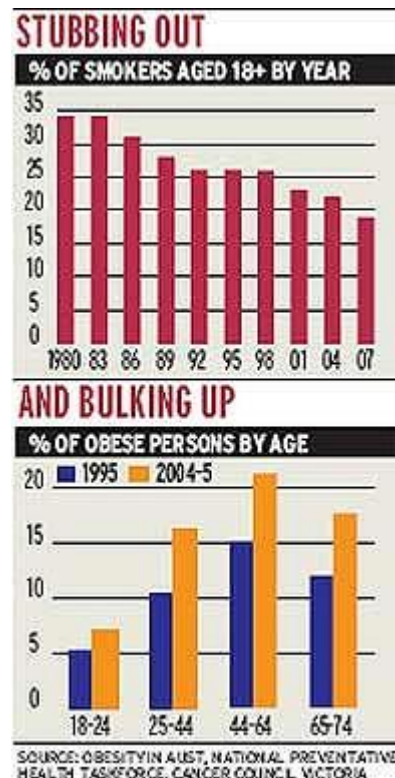
In 2008 the cost of obesity in NSW alone was \$19 billion, according to NSW Health.

Ian Olver, chairman of the Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance, criticised the government for its lack of action on the taskforce's recommendations last year.

Professor Olver said governments had acted strongly against tobacco but had failed to tackle obesity adequately.

"They have access to evidence-based policy and they need to act on it," he said.

The leader of the study, Victoria Hoad, said she expected the rest of the country to reflect the findings in Western Australia.



"Smoking traditionally has been the leading preventable cause of disease but people have been getting fatter and quitting smoking," she said.

Timothy Gill, from the Boden Institute at Sydney University, said people in their 30s and 40s did not understand they faced health problems caused by obesity that in the past were more commonly seen in people in their 60s and 70s.

"There has been a degree of normalisation of the problems," he said. It took 50 years to lower the rates of tobacco use in Australia but there was not that time left to deal with obesity, he said.

A spokesman for the Health Minister, Nicola Roxon, said that the government was investing \$872 million in preventive health.