

THE JURY'S IN ON OBESITY



WOULD you be surprised to learn our children crave healthier eating options? Like many of us, they struggle to feed those cravings. Often they're confused by what foods are healthy, how to prepare basic meals and how to stretch finite cash in their pocket.

Today, more than half of Victorians are overweight or obese — that's 2.6 million people either experiencing or at risk of developing serious health problems including back, reproductive and mental health problems.

Many Victorians are eating and drinking themselves sick. Being overweight or obese can take years off your life. It increases the risk of potentially life-threatening conditions like type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, heart disease and cancer. Young adults who are obese by the time they're 20 are likely to live four years less than their peers.

These health challenges affect some communities more than most. Across Victoria, the proportion of residents who are



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overweight or obese varies from a low of 50 per cent to up to 75 per cent. Obesity is most prevalent in communities that experience disadvantage including those on low incomes, those living in rural areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Victoria isn't alone. Across Australia, more than 15 million people — one in four children, two in three adults — are overweight or obese. Without urgent action, three in four adults and one in three children are expected to be overweight or obese by 2025.

Obesity is our single biggest public health challenge.

It's also a huge drain on our economy and our pockets. In 2008,

obesity cost Australia \$8.3 billion in healthcare, lost productivity and other costs. A report released this week by Obesity Australia warns costs over the next 10 years could hit \$87.7 billion. To put that in context, governments across the nation spent \$44 billion treating hospital patients in 2013-14.

The risks are too great to ignore. Obesity is an epidemic. Australia's obesity problem has evolved over many years. Just like individual weight gain, it took a while before people noticed. It crept up on us.

For most people, gaining weight is a result of eating and drinking too much and exercising too little. Losing weight should be simple — eat better, consume less and drink fewer sugary drinks — but it's not.

The truth is gaining and losing weight is complex. A host of factors influence what we eat and drink and why we become overweight and obese — choice, cost, composition, availability, advertising and, of course, our time-poor lives. Very often if we're feeling stressed we turn to comfort food. I know I do.

For 30 years, governments and

industry have tinkered around the edges, reluctant to push voters too far or take actions that may prove unpopular. Despite the best efforts of governments and public health bodies over many years, obesity rates are rising rapidly; we need to try something different.

At VicHealth, we think it's time to put everyday Victorians in the driving seat. For the first time, we're asking everyday people what actions government, industry and others should take to make healthy eating easier. This weekend, around 100 Victorians will form VicHealth's Citizens' Jury on Obesity, tasked with recommending practical, workable actions to improve the food we eat. They'll spend tomorrow and Sunday considering evidence and questioning experts in behavioural science and public health as well as government and industry leaders before delivering their verdict.

The Jury — a randomly selected cross-section of the Victorian community — includes people from across the state and every walk of life. There are emergency

service workers, teachers, tradies, business owners, students and retirees. The jurors have spent six weeks listening to a range of evidence on obesity, its causes and potential solutions. They've reviewed 64 submissions from individuals and organisations including Alfred Health, Australian Medical Association Victoria, Australian Beverages Council, Australian Breastfeeding Association, CHOICE, Eating Disorders Victoria, Obesity Policy Coalition, Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, and VicHealth. Like a legal jury, each person will consider evidence they've heard and make their own decision on what they feel will actually work.

This is no focus group or a token consultation. VicHealth has set up a panel of decision makers from government, industry and public health, to meet within weeks to consider each of the Jury's "asks" and select actions to trial and implement. This group includes representatives from AMA Victoria, Australian Beverages

Council, Australian Food & Grocery Council, CHOICE, City of Melbourne, Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition Research at Deakin University, Coles, Foodbank Victoria, Obesity Policy Coalition, Tennis Australia and the State Government Department of Premier and Cabinet.

This is the first time a Citizens' Jury has been convened on this scale in Australia to address a major public health issue. Globally, Governments and industry are watching to see how this process evolves. The jury will provide a fascinating insight into what Victorians think can and should be done to improve our food and our diets. We hope it will signal a turning of the obesity tide.

I imagine a future — hopefully not too far away — where our children have more opportunity to make a different, healthier choice. Our children are hungry for change. The question is, are we ready to step up?

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