

Biggest Loser a setback for healthy weight loss

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(Medical Xpress)—The television reality series The Biggest Loser is doing more harm than good in the fight against Australia's obesity epidemic, according to a leading researcher into obesity, diabetes and weight loss at the University of Adelaide.

These views have led to an official complaint about the show to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA), which has so far gone unanswered.

The complaint has been led by Professor Gary Wittert, Director of the Freemasons Foundation Centre for Men's Health and Head of the Discipline of Medicine at the University of Adelaide. Professor Wittert is also Chairperson of the Weight Management Council of Australia, which last year made a written complaint to ACMA.

In a recent episode of the current season of The Biggest Loser, competitors were reported to have collapsed and vomited while attempting to scale 10,000 stairs during a task called "The Punisher" at the Sydney Opera House.

Professor Wittert says these recent events reinforce his many concerns about the TV series and public health.

"The Biggest Loser is a crass attempt to make entertainment of a serious problem, by enticing desperate people to participate, putting them through a gruelling and unrealistic regime of exercise and diet, and

exposing them to public ridicule because of their weight," Professor Wittert says.

"There is no academic, artistic or scientific purpose behind this show. The participants are subject to tactics that induce guilt, shame and fear. A reasonable person would easily form the view that the contestants are demeaned and exploited."

Professor Wittert says the series promotes the expectation that very large [weight loss](#) in a short period of time is achievable and desirable. "Since this is clearly not the case, it is misleading. It may also lead to [physical harm](#) if individuals try to emulate it and even partially succeed, and potentially to psychological harm if they can't.

"There's nothing healthy about exercising until you vomit and collapse," he says.

Professor Wittert says he's also concerned about the level of public ridicule of the contestants, especially on social media.

"You only need to look at the Twitter feed to see what people enjoy most about this show - the opportunity to have a laugh at other people's expense," he says.

"Stereotypes about overweight and obese people have resulted in pervasive levels of discrimination in our community. My concern is that these messages will do little except increase the stigmatisation and levels of despair experienced by those who need genuine help."

Provided by University of Adelaide

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