

Australia slips on number one cause of ill health - poor diet

February 3 2014, by Rachel Gleeson

Australians are being failed by national efforts to make foods healthier, Australian researchers have found. Foods continue to be laden with fat, sugar and salt with few controls on food manufacturers.

Professor Bruce Neal, at The George Institute and The University of Sydney, led a team that evaluated the Federal Government's Food and Health Dialogue, and found it wanting. "It has fantastic aims but a very weak implementation plan," he said.

The evaluation was published today (Monday) in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

The Food and Health Dialogue was launched by the government in mid-2009 to improve the [nutritional profile](#) of foods and help educate consumers about their diets.

But the new research shows that in the first 4 years, targets were set for just 11 out of a possible 124 action areas (8.9%) and none had been delivered. There was also no evidence that any of the proposed educational programs had been implemented.

"Poor diet is now an even bigger cause of ill health for Australia than smoking," said Professor Neal.

"Unfortunately, while the government has been doing a stellar job on tobacco control, it's not doing quite so well in the food space."

"If we are to get on top of health problems like obesity, diabetes and heart disease we have to fully implement the Dialogue objectives. The huge quantities of salt, sugar and fat added to the food supply by industry are now the main cause of ill health in the country, and the Dialogue is the only serious attempt to get on top of this."

"Clearly this is a complex and ongoing process. Some companies have been making a real effort, but if you look at the big picture progress has been depressingly slow," Professor Neal said.

Professor Rob Moodie, a co-author from the University of Melbourne, reinforced the urgent need for action. "We need the Government to make this a priority. And we have to find a way to strengthen a process that relies upon the voluntary engagement of industry. Powerful industry lobby groups like the Australian Food and Grocery Council are stifling action."

The authors compared the Dialogue to successful programmes in the US and the UK and highlight the need for stronger leadership, transparency and regular reporting.

Jane Martin from the Obesity Policy Coalition said: "The UK experience has shown that these types of initiative can be effective but action in Australia is occurring at a glacial pace. If we don't want to be the first generation to outlive our children, then we need to get serious about improving diets, particularly in children. We need meaningful targets, with sanctions for non-compliance and we need the government to take a strong stance and lead the way on this."

The evaluation is calling for more effective implementation, Professor Neal says, with 3 key groups of recommendations around:

- Rationalising of stakeholder roles - government and public health

groups must set the policies. The [food](#) industry must deliver them. Government needs to take a stronger leadership role.

- Clear targets and timelines, with consequences for non-achievement - i.e. enforcement if voluntary measures fail to deliver. Currently, business incentives all push for the addition of more salt, fat and sugar in order to maximise profit.
- Better transparency and reporting - the successes and failures of individual industry players need to be highlighted, with easy community access to information that will empower consumer choices.

Provided by University of Sydney

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