

Public pressure needed to counter child obesity

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About one-third of children are now overweight or obese in New Zealand and public pressure is needed to change food and health policies to counter this, according to researchers at the University of Auckland.

"The implementation of a comprehensive package of strong policies at the national level to reduce obesity typically takes time and is particularly difficult when the political climate for it is not optimal," says University of Auckland research fellow, Dr Stefanie Vandevijvere in a letter published in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* with fellow researchers, Professor Boyd Swinburn and Erica D'Souza.

"To date, the pressure for action on reducing obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) has been predominantly elite (health professional driven), not grass-roots (public driven), and this is part of the reason that there has been little policy action," says Dr Vandevijvere.

"While most of the public are highly supportive of various policies to improve the healthiness of food environments, as shown in multiple studies in Australia, it is a quiet support, and strategies, tools and processes are needed to effectively convert that support into vocal demands for increased and stronger actions on food environments."

"Government action is more likely with strong, visible public pressure," she says.

"Initiatives should be taken to engage and empower citizens and

consumers to generate local actions to improve the healthiness of their community food environments," says Dr Vandevijvere.

She says, local action could potentially be stimulated through encouraging and inspiring citizens to collect data through smartphone applications on the healthiness of their local food environment and could also be feeding the data back to local stakeholders, such as Members of Parliament, Council representatives, local NGO branches, and school and retailer representatives.

"An additional feature could be the benchmarking of local communities, schools and retailers according to the healthiness of their food environment," she says. "Local, direct feedback to decision-makers and fostering relationships with them is arguably a more powerful way to convert evidence into action for healthier food environments than a national approach only."

"Citizen engagement and empowerment might also strengthen and create social movements for healthy foods," says Dr Vandevijvere. "The proposed approach holds promise as well for stimulating improvements in local physical activity environments."

Data on food environments, generated for local benefit of New Zealand communities, schools and retailers, could also feed into national monitoring of the healthiness of food environments and reduce the costs associated with it, she says.

The first national survey on food environments and policies in the world is now being organised in New Zealand by the International Network for Food and Obesity/NCDs Research, Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS).

"While national surveys and statistics have an important role to generate

policy action, local data may be even more powerful," says Dr Vandevijvere.

Examples from other disciplines include smoking deaths by electorate, hospital data by District Health Board, and road deaths by locality. To get such level of local data, novel data collection methods, such as crowdsourcing, will be needed, and their feasibility and validity tested.

INFORMAS aims to test approaches to crowdsourcing data on the healthiness of community food environments and using the data to generate feedback for local stakeholders, in New Zealand in 2015-2016.

"Approaches to engaging and empowering citizens and consumers to improve the healthiness of their local [food environments](#) through crowdsourcing and local feedback loops will be tested in New Zealand, and might show potential for reducing childhood obesity rates, at times when implementation of strong policies at the national level proves to be challenging and slow," she says.

"Ultimately, public pressure, in addition to the pressure of health professionals, might accelerate the implementation of strong national policies to reduce childhood obesity in New Zealand."

Provided by University of Auckland

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