

# Renewed call in *Lancet* for governments to get smart to curb obesity

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A University of Otago economist has written in the latest issue of the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* that Government policy-makers serious about curbing the obesity epidemic should take into account the evidence from behavioural sciences about how people choose their food – and not just listen to the food industry.

The paper, which provides policy-design advice to policy makers interested in tackling obesity, is part of a *Lancet* "series" on the subject published online today, comprised of several related papers to be published simultaneously in a single issue of the journal.

"Our paper in particular makes the point that policy responses should take into account the wealth of knowledge available from research in the [behavioural sciences](#) about how people choose foods. There is a school of thought (dominant in some policy circles) that when the [food industry](#) produces brand-name foods that are highly processed, calorie-rich, and laden with flavour chemicals, the industry is just responding to the desires of consumers," says Dr Trent Smith, one of the authors from the Department of Economics at the University of Otago Business School.

"But the behavioural sciences reveal that in fact, dietary habits grow out of a wealth of life experiences, and can be influenced by context, advertising messages and exposure during critical periods in childhood.

"A sophisticated response to the [obesity epidemic](#) should take this evidence into account. Governments and [public health](#) officials all over

the world are struggling with how to respond to the ongoing epidemic of obesity; our message is that the "smart" policy responses should make use of the evidence from behavioural science."

Obesity rates have risen dramatically in much of the world in recent decades, and [obesity](#) is now widely considered one of our most important and pressing public health problems.

Policies Dr Smith and his international collaborators favour include:

- Regulation of marketing of inappropriate complementary foods to parents and caregivers.
- Provision of nutrient counselling for parents.
- Nutrition education for children
- Health food initiatives in schools
- Food policies that restrict unhealthy foods and health food initiatives in pre-schools and schools
- Regulation of unhealthy food marketing to children
- Regulation of claims on foods that mislead children and parents
- Community gardening projects
- Targeted food subsidies
- Better nutrition labels on [food](#), and warning symbols
- Food taxes

Provided by University of Otago

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