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Tackling diabetes: A societal problem requiring a Government response

Statement by Dr Sophie Scamps Independent MP for Mackellar

The Australian Government must urgently act to tackle the epidemic of obesity and Type 2 diabetes in Australia.

With one quarter of all children and two-thirds of adults above the healthy weight range - obesity and type 2 diabetes are societal problems requiring a societal response.

These diseases are causing greater harm to Australians than even smoking did at its peak and yet for the past two decades the Federal Government has not acted to alleviate the harm as it did for smoking.

And what's worse, Type 2 diabetes mellitus is now affecting younger and younger people such that, what was once a disease of middle age, is now increasingly impacting children and causing lifelong ill health and early death.

It is a tragedy in slow motion that is causing widespread harm to Australians across the country.

As elected representatives we have a duty to care for our citizens and children. Our failure to act now will fall most heavily on future generations and the most vulnerable groups.

Initiatives that only target individual behaviour – will never be enough. We have a duty to protect children from predatory marketing of unhealthy foods. Our children simply cannot escape unhealthy food marketing – it is ubiquitous online, and across TV and radio.

That's why I am imploring the Albanese Government to immediately act on the recommendations in this landmark report into diabetes by the House of Representatives Standing committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport.

That means taking the two most effective steps that many other countries have taken.

The first is implementing **a levy on sugar-sweetened beverages, graduated according to sugar content**. This will encourage manufacturers to reformulate their products and lower their liability, delivering benefits to consumers.

Evidence from among the 103 countries that have implemented similar measures shows that these levies drive companies to reformulate their products to contain lower sugar content. In the long run this will save individuals immense health costs.

The argument that these measures add to costs that disadvantage certain groups is short sighted because these same groups will be the ones hit but future medical costs. How do you put a price on a child's wellbeing?

The second is to **restrict marketing and advertising of unhealthy food to children** on all platforms including online and gaming platforms.

As a GP I saw the impact that diabetes has on patients: blindness, strokes, heart disease, amputation, nerve and kidney damage. It is a leading cause of premature death, but prior to that, patients and their families see their quality of life eroded.

I have been campaigning for restrictions to prevent advertising of all unhealthy foods and beverages to children on television, radio and online since I was elected to parliament in May 2022.

That's why I moved my private members bill in June 2023. This is not radical. Some 40 countries have done it, including the UK, Norway, Mexico and Chile.

It will just take guts for the Albanese government to stand up to the powerful soft drink and junk food industry.

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