



## AHPC Opinion piece

Worldwide, the health challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century comes from the chronic diseases that threaten to overwhelm health services, individuals and families alike. The World Health Organization has mapped out what governments need to do to protect their citizens from chronic diseases.

One in two Australians has a chronic disease such as cardiovascular disease or cancer which are leading causes of disability and death. Some can be prevented because they share risk factors including obesity, physical inactivity, smoking, raised blood pressure and cholesterol.

Governments' efforts are failing us despite at least a decade of sound evidence of what needs done. National leaders are yet to heed the calls for protective policies. As with the hard road to reduce smoking, industry opposes the experts. They cry, 'Nanny state' and infringement of the free market and argue for people's rights to make harmful choices as well as healthy ones.

Expecting individuals to keep themselves healthy in a world where there is a vast array of unhealthy products and barriers against making the right choice is unrealistic.

A healthy country is a wealthy country. The link between health and a productive economy mustn't be forgotten. A central role of government is to protect us. Once it was from infectious diseases. Now it's pervasive harmful food and beverages which require the same approach – regulation and legislation - as experience from tobacco control has shown.

What is starkly obvious is that where people live influences their health - wealthier suburbs are healthier suburbs but chronic diseases affect all of us, rich and poor.

The problem of chronic diseases is not one of poor behaviour by individuals, it is a problem of contemporary environments and working and living styles that put us all at risk, and that most affect those with the least resources.

This is why national leadership is necessary.

In 2009, Australia introduced mandatory folic acid fortification of wheat flour used in bread to reduce the numbers of infants born with spina bifida. Reformulation of food saves lives. Reducing the salt content in processed or pre-prepared foods has the potential to save over 3,000 lives a year by lowering our average blood pressure.

This month, both the Presidents of Medical Colleges and the Australian Medical Association publicly called for a sugar tax. The negative effects that high levels of sugar consumption have on health are known. Overweight and obesity affects 1 in 4 children. Young people are consuming over 23 teaspoons of sugar daily. And public opinion supports a sugar tax.

Today (Monday 28 November) the Australian Health Policy Collaboration, a think tank at Victoria University, is launching a policy report calling on Australian governments to lead in protecting us.

The report has been developed with a national collaboration of experts, clinicians and organisations has worked together to provide leadership on what Australia needs to do to put the health of Australians first. The report, *Getting Australia's Health on Track*, urges governments, state, local and



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federal to collaborate and implement a suite of 10 priority policy actions on risk factors that are effective and affordable.

Protection and promotion of good health and prevention of avoidable death and disease are central tenets of our national values. They are characteristics of thriving communities and a thriving economy. Australia has led the way in protecting people from the impacts of smoking and in preventing road deaths. We have invested in providing national access to high quality health services and to lifesaving and health promoting technologies and treatments. We know that good health, and recovery from illness, cannot be left to the capacity and resources of individuals.

There is no lack of evidence about the growing economic burden of preventable chronic diseases; there is ample evidence of what needs to be done to reduce that burden. Our economy, and our communities, need urgent action to improve our national health.

Read Getting Australia's Health on Track [here](#)

**Rosemary Calder, Director, Australian Health Policy Collaboration**

**James Dunbar, Research Advisor, Australian Health Policy Collaboration**

**Hazel Fetherston, Chronic Disease Program Coordinator, Australian Health Policy Collaboration**

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