



The Australian and New Zealand Obesity Society

MEDIA RELEASE

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New Zealand Government wins 'Couch Potato' award

Australia has beaten New Zealand in a low-scoring Trans-Tasman 'Test Match' of obesity policies and programs at the Australian New Zealand Obesity Society's (ANZOS) annual Couch Potato Awards announced Thursday night.

This year's awards pitted the two nations against each other across eight areas of government action including leadership, food marketing, food labelling, fiscal policies and social marketing to tackle the pressing issue of obesity in both countries.

Jane Martin, Chair of the Public Health Subcommittee of ANZOS said while Australia won on points, both countries failed to score highly in any of the categories, despite obesity rates reaching record levels in Australia and New Zealand.

"While Australians and New Zealanders like to perceive themselves as sporty, outdoorsy types, they are in fact exercising too little and eating too much junk food. Around two-thirds of Australians and New Zealanders are overweight or obese.

"It's extremely concerning that despite these rates, the New Zealand government has shown particularly weak leadership in the area of health promotion, in fact it appears adverse to it while providing concessions to the processed food industry.

"In the past few years, the New Zealand Government has defunded programs such as Healthy Eating, Health Action and pulled away from healthy eating policies in schools. It's vital these are reinstated and extended to the public sector such as hospitals. There is emerging evidence that community-based interventions such as Project Energize in Waikato could be effective but this must be scaled up to reach children across New Zealand," Ms Martin.

While both countries share the ongoing problems of confusing food labelling and relentless, unhealthy food marketing targeting children, Australia has taken a more comprehensive approach to tackling obesity through whole of community programs.

"In Australia, particularly Victoria and South Australia, we've seen state governments using federal funding to value-add and enhance programs such as the Prevention Community Model (Victoria) and Obesity Prevention and Lifestyle program (SA) that tackle obesity through programs in schools, workplaces and in the broader community.

“Australia has also made some progress via the Australian National Preventative Health Agency in social marketing – creating advertising to encourage healthier behaviours such as the Swap It campaign – however more could certainly be done in this area,” Ms Martin said.

Ms Martin said the overriding theme of the health policy in both countries was the interference of unhealthy food industry in the process.

“In food labelling and food marketing, we are seeing both governments put the commercial interests ahead of the health of the population.”

Trans-Tasman ‘Test Match’ of obesity policy – a snapshot of how each country fared

Policy/ program	Australia	New Zealand
Comprehensive plan and leadership	Some sense of commitment to obesity prevention, some good state leadership but weak federal leadership and not well coordinated nationally. Good National Preventive Health Taskforce plan but little policy implementation.	Weak leadership with an aversion to health promotion. Good Healthy Eating Healthy Action plan but now being defunded
Food marketing	Self-regulation of unhealthy food marketing to children has failed – marketing continues unabated	Self-regulation of unhealthy food marketing to children has failed – marketing continues unabated
Food labelling	Making progress on front of pack labelling however health outcomes being diminished by a heavy food industry influence on the policy-making process	Making progress on front of pack labelling however health outcomes being diminished by a heavy food industry influence on the policy-making process
Public sector, healthy food service	School canteen policies, and early progress in other settings such as hospitals	National program revoked by government – some voluntary activity in schools
Fiscal policies	Minimal activity – no GST on fruit and veg as only major policy	Removal of GST from fruit and vegetables proposed but no government support for this or other fiscal policies to improve healthy eating
Food composition	Progress slow. The new dietary guidelines attempt to reduce foods high in salt, saturated fat and added sugar, but targets are generally lacking and monitoring is poor in most	Weak area for national government but some good work by NGOs

	areas.	
Supporting action in settings	Federal funding of \$870m over 6 years mainly supporting action in communities, schools and workplaces	Some good action locally – eg Project Energize in the Waikato region but no major national funding
Social marketing	Some work by ANPHA but greater funding required	Funding has been cut in the creation of the new Health Promotion Agency and it has the processed food industry lobby group represented at Board level

About the Couch Potato Award

The award is judged by members of the Australian New Zealand Obesity Society (ANZOS) as well key public health experts from each country. The award is decided on the basis of rating and comparing progress across a range of obesity prevention priorities towards achievable benchmarks.

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