



Elevating preventive health policies to tackle chronic disease:
Australia’s greatest health challenge

3 June 2016

Dear Party Leaders

Preventable illnesses and diseases place significant pressure on our hospitals and health systems and jeopardise the wellbeing and livelihood of all Australians.

Chronic diseases such as heart disease, dementia, stroke, kidney disease, cancer and type 2 diabetes are all too common in Australia, accounting for 83 per cent of premature deaths (deaths among people aged less than 75 years) and 66 per cent of the total burden of disease.

It is no surprise that the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) has identified chronic disease as “Australia's biggest health challenge”.

Despite this, our investment in preventive health has fallen. Australia underinvests in prevention and public health as a share of health expenditure when compared to other countries, contributing only two per cent compared to New Zealand’s 6.4 per cent and Canada’s 5.9 per cent.

Our failure to adequately address this looming crisis is evident in the continued rise of obesity rates. Because of our inaction in this area, for the first time, we face the very real prospect that our children will have a shorter life expectancy than us.

We can no longer adopt an ‘ambulance at the bottom of the hill’ approach to health in this country. We continue to lead the world in preventing disease and death from tobacco use and we can do the same in other areas. We must be the fence at the top of the cliff.

This is not a problem without solutions.

At least 31 per cent of the burden of disease in Australia is preventable.

Prevention of these conditions can occur by targeting four common risk factors: smoking, alcohol consumption, poor nutrition and physical inactivity.

Prevention 1st has outlined seven actions required to get Australia ready to face the challenge presented by chronic disease. These are:

1. Increase the expenditure on preventive health and ensure that resources are appropriately allocated to address the burden of chronic disease.
2. Commit to achieving the World Health Organization’s 2025 non-communicable disease reduction targets and publically reporting the progress in reaching these targets.
3. Reform tax systems to minimise economic externalities, encourage healthier choices, and maximise the health and economic benefits to the community.
4. Implement a health warning labelling regime on alcohol and food products to provide information to the community at the point of consumption.
5. Stop unhealthy promotion and marketing of products that are associated with increased risk of chronic disease.
6. Create physical and social environments that support individuals and communities to make healthy decisions.
7. Fund public education campaigns on alcohol, tobacco, physical inactivity and poor nutrition.

Today we write to you as representatives of a number of organisations with a shared conviction: We believe that every Australian has the right to live and grow in communities that provide them with the best opportunity to live a long and healthy life, and not die prematurely.

If we care about health, then we must put prevention first. Future generations depend on us to take the actions needed to make this happen.

The actions that you take during this election campaign can dramatically improve the lives of Australians and reduce the devastating burden of chronic disease.

We urge you to take this action.

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