

**HEALTH**

MANATŪ HAUORA

133 Molesworth St  
P.O. Box 5013  
Wellington  
New Zealand  
Phone (04) 496 2001  
Fax (04) 496 2340

Ref. No.

## **Global Strategy on diet, physical activity and health**

### **New Zealand statement**

#### **Introduction**

This statement on the World Health Organization's global strategy on diet, physical activity and health has been prepared by the Ministry of Health. It comprises a description of the situation in New Zealand; recent national initiatives; and the relationship between the New Zealand situation and the global strategy.

#### **Summary**

Poor nutrition, inadequate physical activity and obesity result in a major burden of illness and deaths from non-communicable diseases in New Zealand. National action has been taken through the development of an integrated strategy *Healthy Eating- Healthy Action*, which is being followed by an implementation plan.

New Zealand acknowledges the evidence base contained in the report of the Joint WHO/FAO expert consultation. We support the development, by WHO, of the global strategy on diet, physical activity and health and look forward to its adoption, without significant change, at the 57<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly.

#### **Nutrition, physical activity and obesity in New Zealand : the problem**

Nutrition is a key determinant of preventable ill health and death for many New Zealanders. A recent study attributed 40 percent of all deaths (11,000/year) in New Zealand to nutrition-related risk factors, which far exceeds the annual deaths from road crashes (Ministry of Health and University of Auckland 2003).

Physical activity is also important in reducing risk of the major non-communicable diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and cancer, which cause people to die prematurely. Physical activity levels in New Zealand are high by international standards, but available evidence indicates levels of activity for young people may be declining overall. Currently, one third of New Zealanders are insufficiently physically active to benefit their health (SPARC 2003).

Recent survey data indicate that the obesity epidemic in New Zealand has not yet peaked. Over half of adult New Zealanders are overweight and of those 17 percent are obese (Russell et al 1999). For children aged five to 14 years nearly one third are overweight and of those just over 9 percent are obese (Ministry of Health 2003a).

Levels of obesity are of concern, particularly for Māori and Pacific adults and children (Russell et al 1999; Ministry of Health 2003a, Ministry of Health 2003b).

The increases in non-communicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer will continue to grow and are likely to be an excessive burden for our health services in New Zealand. Furthermore, non-communicable disease patterns are a major problem for the smaller Pacific Island nations, many of whom rely on New Zealand and other developed countries for specialist health care services. From an economic perspective alone the only rational option is to take definitive action to halt and where possible prevent obesity, by improving nutrition and increasing physical activity. Thus, a strong statement from WHO in the form of a global strategy for diet, physical activity and health is timely, responsible, forward thinking and essential.

### **National action in New Zealand**

- In 2000 the *New Zealand Health Strategy* (Minister of Health 2000) was launched by the Minister of Health, which included 13 population health objectives for action, three of which were improving nutrition, increasing levels of physical activity and reducing obesity.
- The Ministry has developed an integrated strategy for nutrition, physical activity and obesity *Healthy Eating- Healthy Action Oranga Kal- Oranga Pumau: A Strategic Framework* (Ministry of Health 2003c). The strategy was published in 2003 and provides a high level framework and includes key priorities for action. These five priority areas for action are lower socio-economic groups; children, young people and their families; environments; communication; and the workforce.
- Under development at present is the implementation plan for *Healthy Eating- Healthy Action*, for which the Ministry is seeking input from key stakeholder groups including the health and physical activity sectors, Government sector and the food industry. The plan will provide guidance to planners, funders and providers in the District Health Boards, Primary Health Organisations and wider health sector, other Government agencies and local authorities, physical activity sector and the food industry. The implementation plan will be launched in late May 2004.
- New Zealand has for some years had a comprehensive set of national dietary guidelines, which include a series of seven Food and Nutrition Guidelines for Healthy New Zealanders for the ages and stages of the life cycle. For each of the seven ages and stages there is a background paper for health professionals and a health education pamphlet for the public. A regular review programme is in place.
- As well, guidelines for physical activity for adults have been developed and promoted in New Zealand. At present Sport and Recreation New Zealand (SPARC) is developing physical activity guidelines for pre-school aged children.

## New Zealand position in relation to the global strategy

The Ministry of Health:

- notes that in New Zealand we are fortunate to have an excellent quality, plentiful and varied food supply, which can provide all citizens with an adequate, nutritious, safe and well balanced diet,
- acknowledges and accepts the evidence base for the strategy is contained in *Diet, Nutrition and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases*, report 916 (Report of a Joint WHO/FAO Expert Consultation 2003),
- recognises that accumulating an evidence base is an iterative process and will continue in dynamic areas of research, including establishing the definitive relationships between food, nutrition, physical activity, obesity and health. However, we believe that the evidence base in this area is likely to strengthen the argument for action,
- accepts that for obesity the solutions are not necessarily well established, but doing nothing is not a responsible option. Therefore, we should be guided by best practice and undertake well-evaluated pilot programmes to create the evidence,
- notes that obesity is a worldwide problem and the biggest public health epidemic of our time. Obesity is having an impact in developing countries, those in transition, and the developed countries. It is a complex problem which if ignored will get worse. Action to address obesity requires a long-term, sustainable approach that includes a combination of environmental, social and behavioural interventions,
- supports the World Health Organization's initiative to develop the global strategy for diet, physical activity and health and notes that it is consistent with the New Zealand approach,
- strongly supports WHO's approach to the strategy, the need for a wide range of strategies and tools to address the serious health consequences of inactivity and poor nutrition,
- agrees with the presentation of a menu of options so that countries can select what suits them and their populations,
- notes that the non-prescriptive approach of the global strategy means that although New Zealand is one of the few countries to have already developed its own integrated strategy, the two are still compatible and complementary,
- acknowledges the value of having a global strategy for diet, physical activity and health adopted by the 57<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly. This will provide additional support and useful guidance to New Zealand in areas, such as public health legislation, the direction of nutrition and physical activity programmes, and public health research funding.

## References

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Karen O Poutasi (Dr)  
Director- General of Health

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