

PROJECT TITLE: Building a Portfolio of Interventions: Providing Alternatives for the Promotion of Healthy Weight Among Young Children in Australia

INVESTIGATORS: Professor Donna Cross, Ms Margaret Miller, Dr Lydia Hearn, Ms Delia Hendrie

A recent review of literature on the prevention of overweight and obesity in children, carried out for the APHCRI Stream Four, demonstrates not only the vital importance of developing comprehensive, primary prevention programs for children aged 0-5 years aimed at addressing a range of environmental, social and emotional factors including body image, self-esteem, food preferences and energy balance, but also the critical gap in both prevention programs and evidence of effectiveness for this age group. On the contrary, what the review demonstrates is that all too often in the past, interventions have focused on school aged children and have failed to adequately recognize that food preferences and lifestyle patterns of children and families are well established by the time they reach school age. Furthermore, while there is a growing national consensus that sustainable initiatives to stem the alarming growth in overweight and obesity in Australia should focus on children from birth and engage a variety of primary health care providers (parents, community, child care workers, teachers, nurses, GPs, pediatricians), in reality such interventions extend beyond the scope of the health sector and require multi-faceted planning across a range of government and non-government sectors, which has hampered both their development, implementation and evaluation, particularly with regards to interventions for children aged 2-5 years. Nevertheless, with research indicating that levels of overweight and obesity among preschool children are continuing to rise 1-3, policy action must move forward based on evidence of potential effectiveness from past public health interventions, theory, policy and program logic, intuitive evidence and expert opinion 4, 5. Importantly, the health sector needs to provide leadership in the management, coordination and expertise of this process, and for this it requires flexible tools that enable state and local policy makers with the information to select and develop multi-faceted, best practice interventions to address the particular needs of their target area, while matching these to national goals.

To this end, the proposal aims to develop and pilot a portfolio of interventions for the prevention of overweight and obesity in children aged 2-5 years, for use with different primary health care providers, outlining key components of 'promising' interventions, including: relevance and acceptability, likely cost implications, availability of support materials, staff capacity building needs, and level of engagement of key stakeholders. The key outcome of the proposal will be the development of a portfolio selection guide directed at state and local policy makers to provide them with the information on how to select and develop multi-faceted interventions, how to identify who are the appropriate primary health care providers to work with in their jurisdiction, how to develop partnerships with these primary health care providers, what tools they require to implement the interventions, how to optimise use of scarce resources, and how to ensure consistent messages are delivered across different public health sectors.