

Submission from Barbara Hoare MBBS

I am a rural GP, living and practising in South Gippsland, Victoria. I have worked as a GP for the past 27 years, in NSW, Victoria & for several months in the Republic of Ireland in 2004.

I am stunned that most of my colleagues & patients seem to routinely ignore the issue of climate change & the issue of how to respond to climate change in a meaningful way.

In an effort to use health professionals to encourage the general population to change their behaviour, I strongly encourage the government's adoption of some policies which may be perceived to be radical, but which are appropriate & need to be introduced as soon as possible.

Our average overweight Australian citizen needs to be encouraged to eat much less meat or become vegetarian. This would dramatically reduce the incidence of type 2 diabetes & also of symptomatic osteoarthritis affecting the spine & weightbearing joints (hips & knees), hence reducing the numbers of people needing expensive joint replacement surgery & hence easing the burden of costly health care with all its attendant risks (anaesthetics, infections, etc). It would also reduce chronic constipation, haemorrhoids, diverticular disease, adult asthma, hypertension, heart attacks, strokes, various cancers (notably breast) and other conditions too numerous to list. These diseases all have additional flow on health problems, eg people needing to be hospitalised & then having a drug reaction, staph infection or fall/accident as a result of the admission.

There are various websites which allow calculation of one's carbon footprint & which suggest ways it can be reduced in size. According to this information it is much more useful for the average person to become vegetarian than to stop driving their car. Transporting sufferers of the above diet-induced medical conditions to & from doctors & hospitals is a further huge source of carbon emissions. Importing all the drugs which these people need (as a result of years of over supply of unhealthy foods) increases global carbon emissions & taxes our health system.

It has been shown in a recent USA study that early diabetes type 2 can be reversed in people who adopt a vegan diet. This is not something that most people would be able to manage in the long term, but it illustrates that diet can have enormous effects on health. There is no drug or other treatment known to be able to reverse type 2 diabetes. Drug treatment of diabetes is fraught with side effects, which can be life-threatening.

The proposal that diabetics & obese people be considered for lap-band surgery demonstrates the desperate mentality that persists in trying to fix a lifestyle-related problem with an expensive & potentially

dangerous intervention . In my experience such surgery can only have good outcomes if the lap-bandee is supervised intensively post op by their specialist for the foreseeable future(at further great expense to the patient & the health system) , otherwise people find ways to eat pureed rubbish again & regain the weight quite quickly.

Our average overweight Australian also needs to get out of their car more for obvious reasons. Most people drive to work & drive their children to school daily. They do this because public transport is either non-existent or not adequate & because it is often cheaper to drive than to use public transport. People do not get enough exercise in their daily lives & this also contributes to obesity & its associated medical consequences as above. GPs have been encouraging people to exercise more but the average person's life seems to be dominated by work & it can be very costly to go to the gym or pool. Better public transport would have health benefits for people as well as for the atmosphere.

By far the most dramatically useful intervention at North Yarra Community Health (NYCH) , Collingwood, Victoria, when I worked there last year, was the introduction of free gym memberships for Health Care Card holders (funded by NYCH). These people had been trapped in a deprived rut, unable to afford anything other than cheap (often unhealthy) foods & smokes, staying home to watch TV as they couldn't afford to do anything else. Free gym memberships helped them to get out of their rut, meet people, feel better about themselves, get fitter & stronger & less depressed, sleep better & in some cases even contemplate quitting smoking. The scheme was run by one person at NYCH, our physio, and was transforming people's lives & health slowly but surely. Free public transport for health care card holders would also be of great benefit to people whose lives are so constricted by their poverty & location & their lack of connection to the community. GPs should be able to advise people not to eat foods made by certain companies, such as MasterFoods & others who are driving the clearfelling of forests in Indonesia to plant palm crops for palm oils. Palm oils and the associated trans fats (which have been banned in Europe) are recognised as causing serious health problems. So not only are these companies vandalising the planet & accelerating climate change for their profits , they are helping kill people slowly enough for them to be a burden on the health system for decades in the process.

GPs should be advising people to eat locally - grown organic foods as much as possible, as the longterm effects of agricultural poisons may not be known for generations . Australians will need to rely more & more on locally grown foods in the future to avoid the carbon emissions of non-essential food transport over large distances.

I would like to see the AMA & RACGP advocate that GPs take a much more active role in addressing the health of the planet as well as the population. There would no doubt be objections to my suggestions , especially from big business, but as the months & years go by people

will need to realise that we all have to change & profits are meaningless if there's no future.

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