



SUBMISSION

Health Select Committee

Parliamentary inquiry into obesity and type 2 diabetes in New Zealand

1. Introduction

The Cycling Advocates' Network is pleased to present this submission on the select committee's inquiry into obesity and related type 2 diabetes in New Zealand. This submission has been prepared based on the committee's terms of reference. Our local advocacy groups as well as members may be making individual submissions.

We are making the submission in conjunction with the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC).

We would like to appear in person in Wellington and provide more information or further clarifications on this submission.

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2. About Cycling Advocates' Network

The Cycling Advocates' Network (CAN) of NZ Inc is this country's national network of cycling advocate groups. It is a voice for all cyclists – recreational, commuter and touring. We work with central government and local authorities, on behalf of cyclists, for a better cycling environment. We have affiliated groups and individual members throughout the country, and links with overseas cycling organisations. In addition, many national, regional and local government authorities, transportation consultancies, and cycle industry businesses are supporting organisations. CAN is a member of BikeNZ.

3. Executive Summary

Action against the obesity epidemic requires a concerted and co-ordinated effort by several individuals and agencies – food, transport and education etc.

With regard to food and nutrition we recommend –

- Healthy food policies at all levels of schooling. Controlling food items in school that is energy-dense, like commercial soft drinks, chocolates and fast foods.
- Food labelling to identify healthy / unhealthy foods

- Incentives for manufacturers of healthy food like tax reductions, while increasing taxations on unhealthy foods.

We also agree with the OAC's recommendation on increasing people's physical activity and believe that a combination of nutrition control and physical activities are required to fight the epidemic. There has to be a concerted marketing campaign to raise the need for physical activities among people and cycling being promoted as option.

There is also a need for vigorous implementation of the Ministry of Health's Healthy Eating and Healthy Action plans through increased budgetary funding and availability of resources. We also recommend strong commitment being made at the government / parliament level to fight the epidemic of obesity, by publicly supporting policies to discourage availability of unhealthy foods and encouraging active modes of transport.

We would also like to highlight that the objectives of the New Zealand Transport Strategy are strongly supportive of cycling, and that the promotion of walking and cycling forms a key part of the National Land Transport Programme (Getting there by foot – by Cycle). The NZTS and new transport legislation aim to reduce dependence on motor vehicles. This strategy involves a more active mode of transportation that will create a healthier population. We would also like to highlight the Ministry for the environments 'Urban Design Protocol' whereby, urban design should cater to the need to develop communities around nodes of transport, so that people use public transport and supplement those travels with walking or cycling.

As advocates of cycling, CAN's expertise is in cycling and this submission will focus primarily on its benefits vis-à-vis obesity.

4. Submission

Cycling is a very good form of exercise and CAN believes it should be promoted as an option to everyone – of all ages and gender. A typical cyclist addresses several objectives in one go–

- a. Cost effective transportation – commuting without need for extensive and expensive roading infrastructure to take people from point A to B.
- b. Environmentally friendly mode of transport. There is no greenhouse gas emission that is linked to respiratory diseases related deaths.
- c. Personal Savings – On an average, cycling to work for 4 days a week can easily generate savings of up to \$3,000 a year (if the alternate option was to use a car).
- d. Health and fitness–It is scientifically and clinically proven that cycling improves an individual's health and fitness.

Benefits from cycling are interlinked. For example, savings derived by cycling, will give easier access to “costlier” quality healthy food that may otherwise have not been affordable, especially for the poor. Healthy food will in turn keep the individual healthy and help fight overweight / obesity. Cycling to work provides added benefits of transportation to work, addressing issues of road congestion and environmental pollution, which will in turn reduce incidence of respiratory diseases. All these benefits can be achieved in one go.

Cycling can be used for various purposes – getting to work, recreation, short errands and as a sport – just to name a few. Each time someone cycles for a purpose, he/she is getting healthier.

5. Background

At CAN, while we recognise high-energy density food is one of the causes of overweight and obesity, we also believe the other cause is lack of physical activities. As observed by Prof Tord, one of the reasons for lack of activity is increasing reliance of people on private vehicles as a means of transport and less on walking and cycling. Current roading designs tend to make motoring easier and induce people to drive their cars. Conversely, the designs discourage people from walking or cycling.

The incentives to drive a car are –

- a) Lack of adequate public transport to access certain areas or high cost in existing ones.
- b) Easy availability of car parking facilities.
- c) Relatively low cost of motoring.

This, in turn, reduces peoples' activity levels, who start putting on weight that eventually leads them into overweight and obesity.

BMA has also established direct link between lack of physical activities and obesity which in turn has been associated with various health issues, namely, type 2 diabetes, cardio-vascular, hypertension, asthma, arthritis, bronchitis and increased risk of surgical complications. For women, obesity adds the risks of increased obstetric complications, uterine and cervical cancer and postmenopausal breast cancer.

In 1997, the number of obesity related deaths in New Zealand, was 11,000 that was 40% of all deaths. This was 29 times higher than the road toll. Since then, this toll has not got any better.

The British Medical Association (BMA) research on cycling's ability to fight obesity and related diseases.

BMA found that moderately vigorous cycling is a good way of doing breathing exercises that improves lung and respiratory functions. It noted that J.N Morris found cycling reduced the risk of cardio-vascular diseases with a reduction in incidence of myocardial infarction and ischaemic heart diseases. Cycling is also found to be beneficial to those who already have heart problems.

Cycling is potentially one of the most appropriate ways for individuals to maintain their fitness through the rhythmic contraction and relaxation of the large limb muscles. Cycling does not place high stress on hips, knees, ankles and Achilles tendons, so there is less overstrain of muscles, ligaments and other injuries from overuse.

Combined with an appropriate calorie intake, cycling addresses problems of overweight / obesity. Just half an hour of cycling everyday for 3 to 4 days a week is enough to drop those unnecessary kilos. At the same time, it improves general muscular strength and functioning of heart and lungs, feeling energetic and being more productive at work.

6. Infrastructure requirements

We do recognise that the roading environment is outside the scope of the select committee. However, we would like to highlight this as an issue, since it has a significant impact on the

health of the nation and believe that the committee can influence the concerned authorities to make necessary changes to their policy that will foster walking and cycling.

Transport infrastructure projects should ensure that any road design does not compromise the accessibility for and safety of cyclists. On the other hand LTNZ's requirement of integrating cycling in all road designs should be made mandatory. It is important that local governments provide necessary and adequate facilities for safe cycling either on its own or in conjunction with public transport. Where necessary and possible, a dedicated cycle lane, away from motorised traffic, will provide adequate safety. Traffic calming measures are another way of improving safety of cyclists, for example, speed limits of 30 Kmph in the inner city and residential areas.

There are also people who may not be able to afford a cycle or may want to take a train to their workplace area and cycle from the station to work. Availability of cycles is a major issue for them. Provision of cycles on rent at major interchanges / locations will make it easier for such people to try cycling as an option. The British health committee found such facilities in countries like Norway, Denmark and other east European countries. These facilities are very popular. An organization providing similar facilities does exist in Palmerston North as well and is popular among tourists, students and occasional travellers to the place. Such organizations / facilities should be promoted throughout the country.

7. How to get more cyclists on the road

There needs to be positive action on bringing necessary disincentives for people to drive their cars when not really necessary. For example, a national policy needs to be adopted to ensure that people walk or cycle if they need to travel within a radius of certain distance like 2 kms. People living and working within a short distance should be encouraged to either walk or cycle. There is no need to take even public transport for such short distances.

One way of getting people to cycle will be to develop work and school travel plans that lays emphasis on walking and cycling. Auckland Regional Council has already done that for schools. CAN recommends these plans developed and adopted at a national level.

Work place travel plan

CAN's suggestion for a work place travel plan is that corporations should be encouraged to get at least 10% of their employees to cycle to work. This figure should also be increased every two or three years. This is not a tall order. Results from the recent bike wise week (<http://www.bikewise.co.nz/Site/businessbattle/default.aspx>) showed that in most organizations, employees were quite enthusiastic about cycling. The government and employers should capitalise on this enthusiasm and work together to promote the concept of cycle to work. Getting employees to cycle to work will require providing adequate cycle parking and shower / change over facilities. SPARC has produced a guideline for employers who wish to promote cycle among their employees.

Also, some kind of financial incentives to employees who try to be active (cycling, walking and running) will act as a catalyst. An example case is Nokia (Australia), where employees are reimbursed for the cost of buying a cycle - to a maximum limit - and also given yearly allowance for making the effort to get active and healthy or take public transport to work. New Zealand Police also reward their sworn staff for keeping themselves fit, each time they pass their physical fitness test, which in turn is conducted every year. Activa (subsidiary of Southern Cross Insurance) in New Zealand has a scheme whereby active people are

rewarded with reduced premiums on their policies. All these measures obviously mean a short term cost to employees with returns expected only in the medium to long term, through improved productivity. The govt should step in with incentives like UK-style tax breaks to cover the initial cost of providing such facilities.

School travel plans

School travel plans should aim to get 50% of their children to walk / cycle to school at least 4 days a week. If the Dutch could achieve this figure (based on the House of Commons report), it is possible in New Zealand as well. Incentives for children could be a combination of various types of rewards like healthy snacks that keeps the kids stomach satisfied and gives less incentives for children to go out and get junk food from the nearby fast food joint

There should more emphasis on physical education and activity in schools. While it is acknowledged that schools have a busy curriculum to deliver, it is submitted that innovative teaching can use physical activities to teach certain subjects, for instance, concepts of time, speed and distance can be taught through physical activities like running, jumping etc

When we recommend work places to provide financial and material incentives to employees who keep themselves fit, we recognise the possibility that some people are keeping themselves fit but cannot get these incentives for various reasons – for example, the unemployed, retirees and self employed. The government should come with reward schemes to cover such people.

For both work and school travel plans, one requirement that arises is training in adequate cycling skills. Based on our objectives, CAN already conducts cycling skills workshops. This facility should be publicised and made use of by the members of the public.

An important aspect of cycling is the fear factor. There is a feeling among people that cycling is not safe especially for children who, on most occasions, are forced to cycle alongside cars. This is true. In relation to their number, cyclists are over-represented in accident statistics in New Zealand. Local governments should address such concerns in order to provide safe cycling routes. Certain NZ schools have come up with leaflets that educate people regarding safe cycle habits and address the fear factors. This education material can be made available in all schools. Many schools are also reluctant to let children cycle to school, since they feel they are responsible for the child's safety even on the roads leading to the school. The Ministry of Education should clarify their legal position, so they are comfortable to let the children cycle to school. Promotion of cycling will not be easy until safety is improved and there are a lot of small changes possible that will provide big improvements to safety.

Parenting

Parents are in the large part responsible for what their children eat. It is vital for parents to inculcate in their children from an early age healthy eating habits. In addition, parents should ensure that their children do not spend an inordinate amount of time in front of the television or computer. Parents should also set a good example for their children by following good eating habits and exercising regularly themselves. Organisations such as Plunket are vital in parent education and funding for these organizations should continue so they can follow up on childrens eating and exercise habits.

8. Costs associated with cycling to fight obesity

With all the options suggested, there is likely to be some cost either directly on the government or on the employer. CAN would like to point out that these costs are quite negligible compared to the benefits that will accrue from improved health and productivity of people, thereby reducing demand for public health services, reduced demand for roads and infrastructure and lowers the cost of transportation. Above all, cycling is cost-effective and is easily affordable for most people.

According to the Ministry of Health, (http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/wpg_index/About-obesity) the World Health Organization has estimated that the cost of obesity is 2 to 7 percent of the annual health budget, which equates to at least \$303 million in New Zealand, that includes treatment for many chronic diseases. The report is not clear if this is only the direct cost or costs to the nation in terms of lost productivity due to time off from work or loss of skilled work force due to premature deaths, and the cost of anxiety to the family members. Assuming this is the total cost (direct + indirect), 10% of this amount (about \$30 million) is enough to implement cycle and walking facilities across the nation, over and above the existing investment, with benefits amounting to more than what is invested, with the added bonus of savings in transportation and environmental costs.

9. Acknowledgements

CAN wishes to acknowledge following publications for valuable information that this submission has been based on:

- a. New Zealand evidence for health impacts of transport – background paper prepared by Prof. Tord Kjellstrom & Dr. Sarah Hill for Public Health Advisory Committee – Dec 2002.
- b. Cycling towards health and safety – an Oxford University Press publication of British Medical Association (BMA) journal – 1992
- c. British House of Commons Health Committee's Third report of session 2003-2004 on obesity