

## **OBESITY IN CHILDREN**

### *Grievance*

**MR P.B. WATSON** (Albany) [9.56 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Sport and Recreation. I rise today to speak about a topic that is dear to my heart - getting kids involved in sport. My grievance concerns children with obesity. My childhood memories are of the outdoors, of afternoons spent outside playing cricket and football with my mates, and of weekends spent playing competitive sport and learning all the valuable lessons that team sport and competition can teach kids. Sadly, this is not the same world that our children live in today. I read recently that in the past 20 years rates of obesity in children have risen greatly in many countries, including our own. This has led some researchers to talk about an international epidemic of childhood obesity. That worries me. I am horrified to discover that Australia is one of the world's fattest nations, alongside the United States and the United Kingdom. I am worried because I want the next generation to have the same opportunities that we had when we were kids. I want them to receive the same benefits that we did. I want them to be safe from the health risk that obesity can bring.

The New South Wales Department of Health has said that in the 10-year period from 1985 to 1995, the number of combined overweight and obese Australian children tripled in all age groups and for both boys and girls. The Department of Health also referred to the effect that childhood obesity can have and said that obese children have a 25 to 50 per cent chance of progressing to adult obesity, and it may be as high as 78 per cent in older obese adolescents. It also said that obese adults who were overweight as adolescents also have higher levels of weight-related ill health and a higher risk of early death than those obese adults who become obese only in adulthood. Data from the New South Wales child health survey of 2001 found that 40 per cent of children aged five to 12 years reportedly watch two hours or more of television or videos a day and an average of 15 per cent are reported to play computer games for an hour or more a day on average.

Obesity is a serious and chronic medical condition. My greatest concern for children who are obese is the associated health risks that come with obesity. Children with obesity are more prone to high blood cholesterol, hirsuteness, stress, incontinence, depression, low self-esteem, increased surgical risk, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, hypertension, gall bladder disease, osteoarthritis, sleep apnoea, and uterine, breast, colorectal, kidney and gall bladder cancer. My concern is not only altruistic. I am also concerned about the cost of obesity to society. Obesity costs more than the lives of our children. There is a considerable economic cost to society as well. In 1995 the National Institutes of Health in the United States calculated the direct and indirect costs of obesity and its associated conditions. It found that the direct health cost of obesity in the United States was \$51.6 billion and the indirect health cost was \$47.6 billion, a total of \$99.2 billion. The cost of associated health risks, such as diabetes type 2, osteoarthritis, colon cancer, hypertension and heart disease, combined to make the total direct health costs of obesity approximately 5.7 per cent of all United States health expenditures. The indirect costs are comparable to the economic costs of cigarette smoking. Early in 2002 world experts from the International Obesity Task Force met in Australia and talked about the seriousness of the obesity epidemic, saying it was as serious as AIDS and smoking. The regional coordinator for the task force, Dr Tim Gill, said that the most alarming aspect is not only the extraordinary number of people affected, but also the rapidity with which the problem is increasing. Dr Gill reiterated the information from the United States, and said that it is not just a cosmetic issue, it is a health crisis and it is costing the Australian Government up to \$1.5 billion dollars a year in direct health costs.

As well as the direct health cost to Australia, the group also flagged concerns about the socioeconomic status of kids who are prone to obesity. Melbourne-based research on 560 families has recently been released which shows that disadvantaged families are more likely to suffer from obesity and are more likely to eat a high fat, high energy diet. The research, which was undertaken by Deakin University's Karen Campbell, examined how the family environment impacts upon what children eat. The results indicate that not only are families in lower socioeconomic groups more prone to obesity, but that their children are more likely to live in obesity-promoting environments, watching more television, and having poorer access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

I talked previously about giving our kids the same opportunities that we had. All kids deserve to have the capacity to avoid the health risks that obesity can bring. There are many things that we could do to halt the epidemic of childhood obesity and I am sure it will come as no surprise to members that physical activity is high on my list of solutions. We teach children to talk, walk, run and everything else, but some parents do not teach children the basic lessons about food and exercise. Encouraging our children to exercise and breaking down barriers that children may have to exercise is a great way to start decreasing both the costs and social barriers that obesity cause.

Children do not have to become world champions like Hicham El Guerrouj, who, as I am sure everybody would have seen this morning, won the world 1 500 metre title for the fourth time. They can go out, enjoy themselves, walk and do other exercise. I call on the minister to consider all options to involve kids in sport and help to

create an environment in which kids are interested and engaged in sport and protected from the risks that obesity can bring.

**MR R.C. KUCERA** (Yokine - Minister for Sport and Recreation) [10.04 am]: I acknowledge the member for Albany's lifelong passion for sport in this country and thank him for involving young people in sport. When I, as Minister for Health, visited the member for Albany in his constituency, it was quite obvious from his involvement in junior football and sports generally that he takes a real interest in sport.

The statistics that the member gave are now well known and are becoming quite frightening as far as Australia is concerned. Australia is seen as a nation of sportsmen and sportswomen and a nation that, to use a metaphor, punches well above its weight in international sports. Australia is in danger of catering for only that elite group of sportsmen and sportswomen who will reach the kinds of pinnacles that the member for Albany reached in his career as an international sportsman.

One of the dangers facing Australia is the recent culture of the politics of fear whereby parents no longer allow their children to walk to school. The greatest gift we can give our children is to make sure that our streets are full of people who are going about their lawful business. I urge every parent in this State to make sure that their children can walk the streets safely, whether they do it through walking clubs, mothers clubs that accompany children to school or bolstering the safety house program, and to make sure that children get some exercise by walking from their home to their place of education. When Hon Alan Carpenter, the Minister for Education and Training, was Minister for Sport and Recreation he was equally concerned about this issue and made sure that schools were involved.

In 1991 I went overseas for almost half a year on a Churchill Fellowship. One of the areas that I looked at was the involvement of young people with police and with security issues, including safety houses. By way of example, when I visited schools in France - having been there last year I know that the situation is still the same - I noted that they catered for local sports. All the facilities that schools normally use for sport are used on a constant basis. They are used not only by the children who attend the schools, but also by the community. It was pleasing to walk around a school oval in a particular town in France and see that the small minority sports had premises in and around the oval. Essentially, they had lock-up garages that allowed them to practise archery, kite flying and the like. Children are encouraged to be a part of the process of not becoming couch potatoes, which, unfortunately, children here are in danger of becoming.

I also noticed what was happening in places like New York. It was interesting to hear Rudolph Giuliani talk last night about creating environments that are bad for crooks; that is, creating environments that allow people to go back onto the streets. For example, a few years ago, Central Park was a no-go area. Now it is like a festival on weekends. People go to Central Park to listen to buskers and to play sport. They are actively involved with their families and in the kind of contest that the member for Albany and I grew up knowing. I refer to backyard cricket games, beach cricket games and the like. That is exactly the kind of thing we must lean towards. Again, parents must understand that they themselves have to get involved, and that is not always easy in this day and age of frenetic work. Often both parents work and in that regard there is not a great deal of support for kids.

We must look for well-planned solutions to these problems. We must have targeted responses based on a good understanding of the problems within the community. We must have targeted responses such as settings within the home that ensure that exercise is a part of home life. In the past two years the Minister for Planning and Infrastructure has initiated excellent cycle-path programs in the metropolitan area. Of course, that has not happened in the country, but that is not to say that children in the country cannot be involved in the same kind of activities. The Premier has shown, I believe, considerable leadership on this issue by establishing, some time last year, the physical activity task force, the diverse membership of which includes the Department of Sport and Recreation, for which I am now responsible. It is overseeing the development and implementation of a community physical activity strategy for Western Australia. However, it is not enough. We need to push this issue. We need to urge families and parents in particular that the greatest gift they can give their children is involvement in active sports at a young age. Last Saturday week, I spent time with the under 9s from the Coolbinia Bombers Football Club. The enthusiasm of the parents involved in that club, and the way they push their kids, is terrific. The great thing about that team is that it comprises kids who are not always going to be winners. Kids who are not always that coordinated are out there kicking the footy and are a part of the game, along with their mums and dads. I congratulate every one of those parents who is out there pushing their kids, not only from that team but also every junior team. The key initiative of the Premier's physical activity task force is to hold a national conference in Perth this November to raise public and professional awareness of this issue. I am pleased that while I was Minister for Health the issue of childhood obesity was placed on the national agenda by this country's Ministers for Health. I thank the member for Albany for bringing forward this grievance. Our sports associations also have a role to play. They must realise that money must extend to the grassroots levels. Yesterday I met with Andrew Demitriou from the Australian Football League and this issue was one that I raised with him. We must ensure not only that money is spent on the elite teams, but also that it

flows down to the non-elite teams. I thank the member for Albany for raising this issue. I would be pleased to work with the member in my role as Minister for Sport and Recreation to ensure our kids, our future, receive the same chances we were afforded.

The ACTING SPEAKER (Mr P.W. Andrews): Grievances noted.