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Australia, Obesity

Australia: Tax the Rich (in Sugar)

Obesity is a problem faced by humanity worldwide, however, this issue is extremely problematic in the nation of Australia, where 2 in 3 people are classified as either overweight or obese (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022, web). Unfortunately, obesity rates are not trending in a positive direction in Australia. But, even though this problem is significant, it isn't irreparable. Launching healthy lifestyle campaigns, restricting junk food ads on television and eliminating their sponsorships, and placing a tax on sugary drinks can help Australia make significant improvements to its issue of obesity.

Australia has a population of about 26 million people and about 86% of those people live in urban areas (Macrotrends, 2023, web). This means a vast majority of Australian citizens do not live in rural communities but rather in cities, similar to the United States. Also similar to the United States, the climate and geography throughout Australia vary greatly. Australia has a tropical climate in its northern areas and its interior, but a more temperate southern climate. There are deserts, rangelands, plains, and mountain ranges in Australia.

A typical family in Australia has about 2.59 people, and the typical dwelling for an Australian family is a three-bedroom house or a house that is about 414 square meters (Architecture & Design, 2023, web). Statistics such as these demonstrate that poverty is not a large issue in Australia, as the average yearly wage is the equivalent of 60,000 U.S. dollars (Living in Australia, 2023, web). Australians also have universal healthcare and access to clean water, toilets, electricity, telephones, roads, and local markets. However, even with these luxuries, the general population of Australia still faces one significant problem: they have very poor diets. In fact, one-third of their energy comes from junk food, and one-half of their food is "ultra-processed" (The Conversation, 2023, web). Because of these poor eating habits, a massive wave of obesity has washed over Australia's population.

Due to COVID, the most recent data about obesity in Australia is from 2017-18, and at that point in time, 25% of children and 67% percent of adults were classified as "obese" (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022, web). Obesity rates are calculated using the Body Mass Index, or BMI, an internationally recognized standard for classifying obesity. In Australia, Body Mass Index is calculated by dividing a person's weight in kilograms by the square of their height in meters. A Body Mass Index of under 25.0 is "normal," a BMI of 25.0-29.9 is "overweight," and a BMI of over 30.0 is considered "obese" (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022, web). So, therefore, about 1 in 4 Australian children and 2 in 3 Australian adults have a Body Mass Index of more than 30.0.

There are two main causes of the issue in Australia. First, Australians have very poor diets, but it's not really their fault. (HCF, 2016, web). Unhealthy eating habits have been fully developed by many Australian citizens and those habits are hard to break. These Australian citizens choose to eat unhealthy, processed snacks and fast food often, but they often don't know it because nutritional labeling can be confusing and misleading. Also, in Australia, advertisements for junk foods are rampant and are contributing to the obesity epidemic (HCF, 2016, web). These advertisements create an enticing image of junk foods but don't show the negative health effects associated with these kinds of foods. As a result of these advertisements, many Australians are persuaded to purchase unhealthy foods without fully understanding the negative consequences of consuming them.

The main problem with obesity, poor diets, and advertisements of junk foods is that they promote health problems within an individual. According to the Garvan Institute of Medical Research, the number of Australians diagnosed with diabetes has tripled in the past 20 years. More than one million Australians have been diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, which can be prevented through lifestyle, and there is no sign of the epidemic slowing down (HCF, 2016, web). Diabetes can cause blindness, kidney failure, amputations, heart attack, or stroke. For the first time in human history, people are dying from overnutrition rather than undernutrition.

Australia's obesity epidemic could also have a negative impact on its environment. This is because as people eat more and more junk food, more and more factories to produce junk food need to be built. These factories not only pollute the environment, but they also take up land that could've otherwise been used for agriculture and growing healthy foods. As a result, obesity contributes to the loss of natural land, and it also increases carbon dioxide emissions. The total impact of obesity may be extra emissions of ~700 megatons per year of CO₂ eq, which is about 1.6% of worldwide GHG emissions (PubMed, 2020, web). This increase in carbon dioxide emissions is created because greater food consumption necessitates greater food production.

This problem needs to be addressed and solved soon. There are three plausible solutions for how to address Australia's obesity epidemic:

First, Australia can launch healthy lifestyle advertisement campaigns containing information on food labeling in Australia, what foods are truly healthy, how to prepare healthy meals, and more. These campaigns can be carried out through social media, television, and even in schools. Healthy lifestyle campaigns can aim to educate Australians about what they are truly buying at the grocery store and consuming at home. Because one of the main sources of the obesity epidemic is a lack of consumer knowledge, a healthy lifestyle campaign could be extremely useful in educating Australian citizens. These campaigns could be created by the Australian government, but such a large organization isn't needed to make a difference. Any organization, from a school club to a local non-profit to a nationwide health society, would be able to spread this important information. One clear strength of such an ad campaign is that it can easily be spread throughout all of Australia because it can be carried out entirely digitally. Organizations could create websites, social media posts, or digital advertisements. This solution's main weakness is that there is no way to guarantee that people will pay attention or listen to the campaign's media. For example, when someone is watching television, they often look at their phone during commercial breaks. But, when they are on their phone, they usually just scroll past ads and posts without giving them any attention. Even so, they subconsciously pay attention to some of this content. If Australia launches a large enough advertising campaign it will be able to at least raise some awareness of healthy eating habits, and some awareness is better than none.

Next, Australia can restrict junk food advertisements. This solution is the inverse of the first solution. Currently, Australians see a crazy amount of junk food advertisements everywhere. These advertisements influence Australians to make purchases that are detrimental to their health. In order to both decrease junk food popularity and make room for healthy lifestyle campaigns, Australia should limit the number of junk food advertisements. There is already some limited regulation in place in Australia that sets some limits on advertising during children's television programming on free-to-air TV – the *Australian Content and Children's Television Standards 2020* (Obesity Evidence Hub, 2023, web). These standards do not contain any restrictions specific to unhealthy food marketing, instead, they set general rules about advertising during C and P-rated children's television programming on free-to-air TV (Obesity Evidence Hub, 2023, web). Because there is already some legislation regarding what children can see on TV, Australia has an excellent start to restricting junk food ads. The Australian government just needs to expand these regulations to include restrictions on junk food. This solution is pretty simple, but the junk food industry would undoubtedly be a barrier before this solution comes to fruition. However, if the

citizens of Australia begin to pressure their government to take action on this topic, they could break through this barrier. But, similarly to the first solution, the drawback of this solution is that there is, again, no way to guarantee it will actually solve the obesity problem because once people are inside a grocery store, junk food is still everywhere. Even if outside the grocery store Australians aren't thinking about junk foods, they still will be as they select their groceries.

The final solution that can help Australia is to place a tax on sugary drinks. Of the three solutions discussed, this solution would probably be met with the most pushback, but it also could be the most effective. "There's no dietary need for sugary drinks but we're seeing massive consumption of them," said Professor Greg Johnson, CEO of Diabetes America in 2016. While some junk foods can at least provide a little nutritional value, sugary drinks provide none at all. This is the main reason I, along with Professor Greg Johnson, believe that Australia should impose a tax on sugary drinks within its borders. A tax like this would be highly effective because, unlike the first two solutions discussed, this one could actually influence consumers in grocery stores. Consumers would be less willing to pay extra money for sugary drinks if they cost significantly more than healthier drinks. Also, the money collected from this tax could be used to promote healthier lifestyles or, even better, lower the cost of healthy foods. In this way, a tax on sugary drinks would be beneficial in two ways as it not only discourages consumers from buying unhealthy drinks but also encourages them to buy healthy foods. There is, of course, a weakness to this solution as well. The sugary drink companies would undoubtedly resist this tax on their products heavily as it would hurt their companies' sales. It may even cause some sugary drink companies to shut down. This may not be the worst thing for Australia, since having fewer sugary drink companies would lead to less supply of sugary drinks, and thus, less consumption of them as well. Ultimately, a tax on sugary drinks would be the most effective and beneficial solution to Australia's problem of obesity.

The best part about these solutions is that they aren't unprecedented worldwide. The United States launched nationwide healthy lifestyle campaigns in 2008 under then-First Lady Michelle Obama. Obama planted a garden, waged snappy social media campaigns, and worked behind the scenes with researchers, lawmakers, heads of government departments, schools, and food giants to quietly change what Americans eat (Vox, 2016, web). Through this campaign, which became known as the "Let's Move" campaign, Obama was able to produce tangible results. Obama made getting legislation focused on improving the nutritional value of school lunches a priority, and she succeeded. Congress passed the Hunger-Free Kids Act in 2010 with bipartisan support to help ensure every American child had access to the nutrition they need to grow into healthy adults (USDA, 2023, web). Results of the Healthy-Hunger Free Kids Act school meals provision to date include: more kids are eating school breakfast, over 90 percent of schools report that they are successfully meeting the updated nutrition standards, healthy food standards have not increased food waste, and more (USDA, 2023, web).

Furthermore, over the last few years, several countries and cities around the world have implemented taxes on sugary drinks based on the amount of sugar per volume as a step toward the goal of combating sugar's potential adverse health effects (Tax Foundation, 2019, web). While the efficacy of some of these taxes can be debated, the fact that such taxes existed can't be debated. Norway levies the highest tax, at €0.124 (\$0.146) per can of soda (Tax Foundation, 2019, web). With the highest tax, Norway also produced some outstanding results. In Norway, consumption of sugar has dropped from 43kg per person per year in 2000 to 24kg in 2018. Within the last ten years, there was a 27% decline in sugar consumption. Currently, sugar consumption is lower than it was in 1975 (Diabetes.co.uk, 2019, web). If Norway was able to achieve such success, why can't Australia?

Now, it would be disingenuous to avoid discussing what Australia has done and is currently doing, to combat its obesity epidemic. In 2017, a coalition of 34 organizations, led by the Obesity Policy Coalition and Deakin University's Global Obesity Centre, and including the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne and the Cancer Council, united to call for urgent action from the federal government to address

Australia's "serious obesity problem" (Guardian, 2017, web). This coalition pushed for a 20% tax on sugary drinks, but it never passed. Also, in 2022, the Australian government created the National Obesity Strategy. The National Obesity Strategy is a 10-year framework for action to prevent, reduce, and treat obesity in Australia. It focuses on prevention but also includes actions to better support Australians who are living overweight or obese, to live their healthiest lives (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2022, web). This strategy has the potential to make some real improvements in Australia, especially if they implement any of the solutions discussed here.

Obesity is a problem faced by humanity worldwide, but in Australia, the problem of obesity is much worse than it is in the rest of the world. If nothing more is done to solve this problem, obesity will continue to become more and more prevalent in the Australian population. The two main causes of obesity in Australia are poor diets caused by a lack of consumer knowledge and rampant junk food advertising. Launching healthy lifestyle campaigns, restricting junk food advertisements, and placing a tax on sugary drinks, can help Australia make significant improvements to its issue of obesity. None of these solutions are perfect, but, even with their weaknesses, implementing these solutions, can help Australia make progress in solving its obesity epidemic.

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