

Gorging our way to early grave

GUY BARNETT | June 08, 2013 12.01am

TASMANIA is the fattest state in one of the fattest nations on earth.

Not a good record.

Obesity leads to a range of chronic diseases, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers and respiratory ailments.

Type 2 diabetes is the fastest-growing chronic disease in Australia.

The answer to our woes is prevention, prevention, prevention. But when will this message sink in?

The State of Public Health report released last week by public health director Roscoe Taylor is a wake-up call.

It says the number of obese and overweight Tasmanian children has increased from one in five to one in three in just five years. This statistic alone should knock our socks off.

We are sitting on a time bomb and it will soon explode.

Australia's annual health cost for type 2 diabetes alone is already \$6 billion, rising to \$18 billion by 2025 -- 38,000 Tasmanians already have diagnosed or undiagnosed type 2 diabetes, which is sometimes referred to as a lifestyle disease.

The fuse to this time bomb has been lit, with another 45,000 Tasmanians having pre-diabetes, meaning they are at high risk of type 2 diabetes.

Diabetes remains the leading cause of heart attacks, strokes, blindness, limb amputation and kidney failure.

Obese people are four times more likely to develop diabetes.

Health care costs are one thing. The cost to the economy is another.

Obesity costs the Tasmanian economy \$1 billion per year. This is based on an Access Economics report commissioned by Diabetes Australia and released at one of my Healthy Lifestyle forums, which estimated the cost of obesity in Australia at \$58 billion per year, with \$8 billion in direct health costs and the remainder in indirect, lost productivity and other costs.

Hospitalisation rates in Tasmania have increased 40 per cent in the past nine years to 191,449 in 2011.

Not only does Tasmania have the highest obesity rates in Australia, but also type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

In addition, deaths from cancer, diabetes, heart disease, strokes and sadly suicides are also the highest in the nation.

Tasmania has the highest smoking (21.8 per cent of adults) and alcohol consumption rates of any state.

Conversely, our physical activity rates are well below the national average.

The key statistic is that Tasmanians can now expect to live shorter lives than their mainland cousins.

We can't blame these dreadful statistics on our ageing population or our lower socio-economic factors, though they play a part.

We must stand up and be accountable as a community.

We need to say for the sake of our children, and theirs, enough is enough.

In general, we all eat too much sugar, fat and salt. The public health experts all say cut back.

We should aim for a healthy balanced diet and regular exercise. Easy to say, hard to do, but it must be done.

A recent Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report said that 72 per cent of Australians did not get enough exercise, 90 per cent did not eat enough vegetables, and 50 per cent did not eat enough fruit.

Economic progress in Australia in the 21st century has brought with it access to energy-dense processed food that is high in salt, sugar and fat.

A tax on these products has been recommended by some, but this silver bullet from big government is not the answer, though it may need to be considered down the track as part of a package of measures if people's habits don't change.

New technologies, TV, the internet and sedentary living at school, work and at home, together with improved but non-active transport and more urban living, are all factors against healthy living.

This worsening tragedy is preventable. Detection and early intervention is the way to go.

Targets are used for cutting carbon emissions, and they should also be used to safeguard our children's health.

Children's health and fitness should be benchmarked, just like we do for literacy and numeracy.

These results will be vital to designing healthy, active initiatives.

Healthy eating habits are critical for our children. Only healthy food should be sold through our school canteens and childcare centres. Remove unhealthy food and drink.

Singapore is one of the few countries in the Western world to successfully defeat the childhood obesity epidemic.

They regulate what their children eat and the exercise they undertake each week.

I argued for years for compulsory two hours of physical activity per week in schools, introduced in 2004.

We need school programs on nutritional health, and improved advertising standards directed at better eating habits.

It is estimated that increasing fruit and vegetable consumption by just one serve per day will save the Australian health system \$157 million per year in relation to heart disease alone.

Diabetes Tasmania's evidence-based "The Coach" program has delivered better health outcomes for its 400-plus participants.

Other options include establishing a voucher system to encourage participation in sport across the community.

The Australian Government's Active After School program, launched in Launceston in June 2004, is successful and should be expanded.

We need more healthy school breakfasts and lunches, vegetable gardens and cooking classes.

The State Government has recently cut hard into our health services when the Productivity Commission report reveals Tasmania's health spending of \$5276 per person is 4 per cent below the national average.

If vending machines don't offer healthy options, they should be removed. Water should be made available and encouraged at school and in the workplace.

Takeaways and restaurants should, wherever possible, include nutritional information in store or on their menus.

The Australian Government made obesity a national health priority two years after I first recommended it, but little has been done.

The majority of the recommendations from the Australian Government's National Preventative Health Taskforce Report have not been implemented. They need to be.

It has been more than 10 years since Australia had a national diabetes strategy. It is time. This is why Diabetes Australia will be launching at the National Press Club in Canberra on June 19 our own strategy for action, with the hope of a positive response.

-- One-time adviser to former premier Robin Gray, Guy Barnett was a Liberal senator for Tasmania from 2002-2011. A keen tennis player and cyclist, he is an ambassador for Diabetes Australia and Diabetes Tasmania. Mr Barnett is a Liberal candidate for Lyons for the next state election.