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Media Statement

OBESITY NEEDS TO BE SEEN AS A MEDICAL CONDITION: DIABETES GROUP

WA's peak diabetes research funding group is backing calls for obesity to be seen as a medical condition saying it will help underscore the need to do more to help stop it impacting Australian families.

Ahead of National Diabetes Week 2016 (July 10-16) and coinciding with Obesity Australia's 5th Annual Summit in Sydney, Diabetes Research WA executive director Sheri Westlund said it was important for the whole of the community to formally recognise that obesity, which can be a key factor in type 2 diabetes, was a complex disease.

"Obesity rates are rising in Australia, along with the rates of type 2 diabetes, and it's creating huge health issues as well as putting a lot of pressure on our health budgets but there's still a widespread belief that the solution is as simple as telling people to lose weight and get fit," said Ms Westlund.

"Whilst that sort of belief exists, there's a very real danger not enough will be done to ensure we help people deal with it.

"Whilst as an organisation we support everyone choosing a healthy lifestyle when possible research now clearly shows obesity is a complex medical condition impacted by a web of genetic and lifestyle factors so it's time for a new approach."

Research shows that around one in three people are unlikely to be able to avoid developing type 2 diabetes even if they make significant lifestyle changes.

Ms Westlund said changing the perception of obesity would pave the way for more medical interventions to help those affected by it and spark meaningful community discussion.

"We're very hopeful that when obesity is seen as a medical condition the focus can shift away from blaming and shaming people who are impacted by it to serious attention being put on the solutions," she said.

"Even when considering the 68 percent of cases it's believed can be prevented by maintaining a healthy body weight and exercising, the challenges many people face in doing this are undeniably massive.

"Longer working hours, issues around affordability and availability of fresh food, savvy fast food marketing campaigns, a lack of structured nutrition education, emotional issues linked to overeating – the list of hurdles many face in staying healthy continues to grow and we believe people need to be supported in jumping over them."

Ms Westlund said there was an urgent need to look at strategies such as a sugar tax, more flexible working hours, cheaper access to safer, weatherproof spaces to exercise, requiring restaurants, cafes and fast food outlets to offer 'downsize' options that cost less, as well as supporting further research into the area.

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