

Preventive policy charts path to a healthier future

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The Consumers Health Forum welcomes the National Preventive Health Strategy released today which sets out a positive agenda for a future healthier Australia, backed by the aim to earmark 5 per cent of the health budget for preventive action by 2030.

The strategy identifies seven focus areas for boosted action including accelerating measures to further reduce tobacco use, improving access to healthy diet, exercise and cancer screening and promoting and protecting mental health.

“We have waited some years for the Federal Government to provide a comprehensive national agenda on preventive health and this new strategy provides a strong case for bold, cohesive measures,” the CEO of the Consumers Health Forum, Leanne Wells, said.

“The COVID-19 pandemic provided a wakeup call to health systems worldwide, as it demonstrated that significantly more needs to be done outside of a pandemic to keep people healthy and well. Studies from around the world and in Australia have demonstrated that individuals with preventable chronic conditions and vulnerabilities such as cardiovascular disease, smoking, and obesity, were at greater risk of adverse outcomes associated with COVID.

“We need to rebalance the health system; we need to invest more in prevention,” the strategy states.

“The strategy provides a strong case for stepped up action on preventive health in various areas, including countering obesity. That is a vital first step which we hope will spur real action.

“We particularly welcome the strong consumer and community-focused thrust of the strategy and its recognition of the importance of health literacy and consumers as partners in pursuing better health for all Australians.

“We applaud the commitment to priorities for preventive health action being informed by a national, independent governance mechanism and to an ongoing, long-term preventive health fund – both with targets of 2030.

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“It sets out targets for improved health, particularly among First Nations people and other disadvantaged people, emphasising the importance of health equity for all Australians.

“This document also states what CHF has long argued: that preventive action is good for our health and the economy. It states that accelerated action in the focus areas, but especially on tobacco, nutrition and physical activity, will significantly decrease the overall burden of disease in Australia. “There is an economic benefit to including these focus areas in this Strategy, with research demonstrating that \$6 billion in health costs could be saved by taking action on tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy foods alone’.

“As the strategy states it is seeking to combat the increasing burden of disease, reducing health inequity and increasing preparedness for emerging health threats.

“However, there are important areas absent from the strategy which we have argued should be included in any overall approach on preventive health in particular the failure to include dental/oral preventive health, which disproportionately affects disadvantaged communities and people”.

“The strategy states that prevention is everyone’s business. To address complex health issues such as obesity, the health of Australians must be considered by all policy makers, both within health and broader government portfolios. Health must also be a key consideration for schools, workplaces, businesses, and community organisations.

“In all of these aims, partnerships and community engagement are central to influencing health, ensuring shared decision-making and evidence-based change.

“As the strategy says, partnerships with the community will be strengthened and informed by a national consumer engagement strategy that prioritises co-design approaches in preventive health actions,” Ms Wells said.

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