ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Benchmarking government action for obesity prevention—An innovative advocacy strategy

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Summary

Background: Successful obesity prevention will require a leading role for governments, but internationally they have been slow to act. League tables of benchmark indicators of action can be a valuable advocacy and evaluation tool.
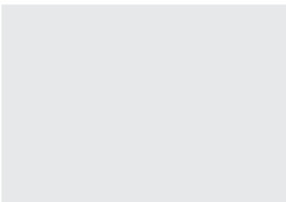
Objective: To develop a benchmarking tool for government action on obesity prevention, implement it across Australian jurisdictions and to publicly award the best and worst performers.

Design: A framework was developed which encompassed nine domains, reflecting best practice government action on obesity prevention: whole-of-government approaches; marketing restrictions; access to affordable, healthy food; school food and physical activity; food in public facilities; urban design and transport; leisure and local environments; health services, and; social marketing. A scoring system was used by non-government key informants to rate the performance of their government. National rankings were generated and the results were communicated to all Premiers/Chief Ministers, the media and the national obesity research and practice community.

Results: Evaluation of the initial tool in 2010 showed it to be feasible to implement and able to discriminate the better and worse performing governments. Evaluation of the rubric in 2011 confirmed this to be a robust and useful method. In relation to government action, the best performing governments were those with whole-of-government approaches, had extended common initiatives and demonstrated innovation and strong political will.

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Conclusion: This new benchmarking tool, the Obesity Action Award, has enabled identification of leading government action on obesity prevention and the key characteristics associated with their success. We recommend this tool for other multi-state/country comparisons.

Introduction

Internationally, governments are being called on to take wide-ranging action to address the growing population burden of obesity. A suite of actions, including programs, policies, regulation and evaluation is required for a comprehensive approach to obesity prevention [1,2]. However in many parts of the world, obesity prevention activity is missing, uncoordinated, ineffective or unevaluated. Along with industry, media, education and other sectors, all levels of government have important roles to play in implementing and facilitating obesity prevention activities, yet governments have typically been very slow act [3]. To date there has been little exploration of mechanisms to increase appropriate government action in this area.

Despite only limited activity in the area of advocacy for obesity prevention, lessons can be learned from successes in other areas of public health, such as tobacco control and road safety. One strategy, previously used to great effect in tobacco control is benchmarking, a process of rating the stringency and comprehensiveness of a suite of provisions by government [4]. Benchmarking provides an index of best practice elements and gives summary scores, allowing a comparison between governments. In tobacco control in Australia, systematic measuring and ranking of tobacco control activity commenced with the *Dirty Ashtray* award, which ranked government tobacco control activities in all states and territories. This award has been credited for stimulating activity and driving the agenda for governments to meet targets or improve on current activities [5]. By identifying and publicising best practice smoking prevention activities and recognizing the best performing government, the award established a benchmark that encouraged similar, or enhanced action by others. In addition, the award process carried stigma for the worst performing, or lowest ranked, government which also attracted negative media attention.

Building on the experiences in tobacco control, the aim of this study was to examine the feasibility of developing and implementing a similar bench marking-based advocacy strategy in obesity prevention. This paper describes the development of the Obesity Action Award — a benchmarking tool auspiced by the Australia & New Zealand Obesity Society to compare obesity prevention policy between states and territories within Australia.

Materials and methods

Development of the obesity action checklist

To identify the areas of government action required to prevent obesity at a population level we undertook a review of the evidence on public policy activities in obesity [5] and other areas of public health [6] and consulted with experts working in the field within Australia. Based on this formative research, a checklist was developed to categorise the broad areas of government action possible for obesity prevention. The checklist comprised nine domains, each with a number of key criteria consisting of components of a comprehensive obesity prevention strategy in the Australian context (Table 1). The domains identified encompassed a wide range of activities, including policies, programs, monitoring, evaluation and coordinated action across government. In addition, there was an opportunity to provide additional activities that were not captured within the areas already defined and to identify innovative and emerging government initiatives. Various examples of desirable elements were outlined within each of the categories to assist with the assessment. The obesity action checklist was designed to be completed by key non-government informants from each state or territory to rate the activity of their own government, providing a score from zero to ten based on their assessment, with ten being the best possible score. Key informants were also asked to provide some commentary within each category to justify the score given. The checklist is continually evaluated and updated to ensure relevance and consistency with emerging research and practice-based evidence. The current 'Obesity Prevention' rubric is detailed in Table 2.