

Review of Australian Childhood Obesity Research Funding 2010–2013

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Child and adolescent obesity is a serious public health concern in Australia.¹ In order to address the immediate and longer-term consequences, evidence-based and evidence-creating treatment and prevention interventions are required.

The Australasian Child and Adolescent Obesity Research Network (ACAORN) previously reviewed funding outcomes by major medical research funding bodies (i.e. National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), Australian Research Council (ARC), Diabetes Australia Research Trust and National Heart Foundation) related to obesity in children for the years 2005–2009.² The review found that 44 such projects were funded (~Au\$21 million), with the NHMRC contributing the majority of funding. At the time, we raised our concern regarding the small proportion of total NHMRC funding that was specifically allocated to paediatric obesity research (~0.5%).²

To determine whether there had been improvements in the amount of funding awarded to childhood obesity research, we conducted a similar review in November 2012. We found that between 2010 and 2013, 29 projects related to childhood obesity were funded, including 12 NHMRC project grants (~Au\$9 million) and one NHMRC Centre of Research Excellence, which has only a partial focus on children (Au\$2.5 million). Interestingly, the proportion of total NHMRC funding allocated to childhood obesity research was still just 0.5%. Over the same period, the ARC allocated approximately Au\$4 million to Australian research projects that were at least partially related to child and adolescent obesity (~0.4% of total funding). Surprisingly, only 30% and 46% of NHMRC and ARC funding allocated to childhood obesity research, respectively, was focused on health promotion (i.e. evaluation of an intervention, strategy or policy to prevent or manage obesity).

Our findings suggest that little has changed since 2009 with regard to government funding allocated to child and adolescent obesity research, despite the call for increased funding from major

government reports, such as the National Preventative Health Task Force report.³

Obesity treatment and prevention is clearly aligned to the second National Research Priority *Promoting and Maintaining Good Health* and the Priority Goals *A Healthy Start to Life and Preventive Healthcare* (http://www.arc.gov.au/pdf/nrps_and_goals.pdf, accessed 11 December 2012). However, only a fraction of federal research funds are currently being allocated to address this major public health issue. It is of additional concern that changes to ARC funding regulations may further reduce funding for child and adolescent obesity research in Australia. ARC funding now excludes medical research and/or training focused on understanding or treating a human disease or health condition.

One in four Australian children and adolescents is currently overweight or obese,¹ and our country is facing a substantial generational increase in premature morbidity in the next 20–30 years with significant personal, public health and economic costs. ACAORN calls on funding organisations to:

- allocate targeted funding for child and adolescent obesity research;
- develop a national childhood obesity research strategic agenda;
- improve the transparency by funding bodies in regards to their criteria for allocating funding; and
- increase the expertise of grant review panels in areas such as health promotion, public health interventions and child and adolescent health interventions.

References

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