

Australia's Scorecard on Noncommunicable Diseases in 2020

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Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are responsible for more than 63% of global deaths annually and are largely preventable through targeting five key risk factors: tobacco use, physical inactivity, unhealthy diets, harmful alcohol consumption and air pollution. The Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013 – 2020 published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) commits Member States, including Australia, to ambitious goals in reducing the global burden of NCDs. Among others, these include halting the overall rise of obesity and a reduction in the harmful use of alcohol and tobacco.¹

In Australia, NCDs are responsible for nearly 90% of annual deaths and the progress made towards controlling these risk factors is poor.² Simply committing to the WHO Global Action Plan and other ambitious international goals, such as Sustainable Development Goal target 3.4, does not generate outcomes and governments must be held accountable for commitments made. Hence, there is an opportunity for civil society, including youth groups and movements, to hold the government and private sector to account to address the pressing need of accelerating action towards NCD prevention and control, where attention ought to be paid to adopting, enforcing and evaluating evidence-based and people-centred NCD policies free of conflicts of interest, with a strong focus on human rights.

This week is the Global Week for Action on NCDs, seeking to encourage accountability from all stakeholders in maintaining progress towards reaching these ambitious targets. The WHO Noncommunicable Diseases Progress Monitor provides a scorecard for NCDs nationally, and in 2019 no achievement had been made in multiple domains in Australia. These unmet domains surrounded national strategy with no achievement made towards setting national NCD targets with time-based goals and no integrated national NCD action plan. More specifically, Australia reports no achievement in advertising bans or comprehensive restrictions in the reduction in harmful use of alcohol. There has also been no achievement in restrictions on the marketing of breast-milk substitutes. Partial achievement has been reported in generating national policies to reduce salt consumption and in restriction on the physical availability of alcohol. Strong gains have been made in public awareness and education around physical activity, and Australia has made long-term progress in multiple targets towards reducing tobacco use.²

Importantly, there is an existing commitment by the federal government to develop its proposed National Preventative Health Strategy to complement the current national health strategies; these include the National Strategic Framework for Chronic Conditions, the National Obesity Strategy and the National Tobacco Strategy. While the implementation of this strategy has been delayed due to COVID-19, it is currently open for public consultation and it is imperative young people and people living with NCDs contribute to this process.³

Preventing NCDs in childhood is a central goal with 1 in 4 children in Australia overweight or obese and no improvements in these rates over the decade from 2007. A concerning 75% of children in Australia do not meet recommendations for physical activity.⁴ The Australian Health Policy Collaboration has developed a health tracker to assess national progress towards reducing the prevalence of NCDs and this paints a grim picture for Australia in 2019 showing rising rates of childhood obesity, 70% of children exceeding dietary sugar recommendations and 91% of young people not meeting physical activity recommendations.⁵

Collaboration between stakeholders including governments, private enterprise (free of conflict of interest) and civil society, particularly people living with NCDs and youth, is required to sustain progress to eliminating NCDs, especially if sufficient progress is to be achieved towards fulfilling global targets by 2025 and 2030. Ongoing evaluation of commitments made and a coordinated approach including these stakeholders will allow collaborative strategy in action towards meeting these ambitious targets. Without accountability and an increased push for progress, these goals will remain unmet. Governments must be held accountable to the commitments made and Australia must take urgent action to make gains in the control of NCDs.

References

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