

Healthy food retail in remote NT communities identified as top priority

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The Northern Territory government has a long way to go in their efforts to address obesity and create healthier food environments, according to the latest scorecard of government performance on food policy.

The [Food Policy Index](#), first developed and implemented in 2017, benchmarks Australian governments on their implementation of globally recommended policies to improve population diets.

Professor Gary Sacks from Deakin University's Institute for Health Transformation who compiled the most recent report said greater policy action was required by the NT government.

"While we commend the government for the steps it has taken to support Territorians to improve their diets, including improvements in the healthiness of foods in schools and hospitals, there is still a long way to go," Professor Sacks said.

"Supporting efforts to establish a licensing and accreditation scheme for healthy food retail in remote Indigenous communities needs to be one of the top priorities for the NT government."

Professor Sacks said a key recommendation from the 2020 Parliamentary Inquiry into Food Pricing and Food Security in Remote Indigenous Communities was the need for a licensing and inspection scheme for all remote stores.

"The Healthy Stores 2020 study showed that restrictions on price promotion and product placement of unhealthy foods and drinks resulted in 1.8 tonnes less sugar being sold from 10 stores over 12 weeks while not impacting store profits," Professor Sacks said.

"If this was extrapolated out across all remote stores over a year, the reduction could be as much as 90 tonnes a year, which equates to the weight of 60 medium sized family cars.

Modelling suggests that this reduction in sugar could result in a 10 per cent risk reduction in mortality from cardiovascular disease."

Associate Professor Julie Brimblecombe, from Monash University said the Coalition for Healthy Remote Stores* was calling on the NT government to include additional requirements in the licensing program in line with what is known to work from evidence co-designed and generated with remote communities.

"We want to see restrictions on the promotion of unhealthy foods that include 1) No promotions on unhealthy food and drinks 2) No unhealthy food and drinks in high traffic areas 3) No sugary soft drinks more than 600ml in refrigerators and 4) Less than 40per cent of refrigerator facings for sugar sweetened beverages," Associate Professor Brimblecombe said.

Ms Khia De Silva, Nutrition Manager of The Arnhem Land Aboriginal Progress Corporation, said storeowners and retailers had done much to create healthy food retail stores but now it was time for government to help them do more.

"We can only put all the known healthy strategies in place when all stores operating in remote communities are doing the same," Ms De Silva said.

“With a level playing field, so much more can be done to create healthy stores for healthy communities. Our board has called for measures to support this level playing field which would be created by a strengthened Remote Stores Licensing Program”.

Professor Sacks said nearly 65 per cent of Australian adults, and 25 per cent of Australian children are living with overweight or obesity.

“Less than seven per cent of people in Australia consume a healthy diet consistent with the Australian Dietary Guidelines. These statistics haven’t improved over the past few years, despite obesity prevention being a national health priority.

“We now have a National Obesity Strategy with clear recommendations for improving food environments, but this has yet to result in any changes on the ground. State and Territory governments must play their part in implementing actions in the strategy to reduce obesity rates.”

*The Coalition for Healthy Remote Stores is represented by remote retail, health and academic organisations; The Arnhem Land Aboriginal Progress Corporation, Laynhapuy Homelands Aboriginal Corporation, Central Australian Aboriginal Congress, Menzies School of Health Research, Healthy Living NT, The University of Queensland, Monash University, Indigenous Allied Health Australia, Heart Foundation, Diabetes Australia, Obesity Policy Coalition.

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The Food Policy Index (Food-EPI) Australia

The Food Policy Index (Food-EPI) Australia initiative is an ongoing process to benchmark Australian governments (Commonwealth and States / Territories) on their progress in implementing globally recommended policies to improve population diets and address obesity. The goal of the initiative is help facilitate implementation of a comprehensive and cohesive set of actions.

Policies for tackling obesity and creating healthier food environments: scorecard and priority recommendations for the Northern Territory Government, February 2023.

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