

Economist calls for unhealthy eating to be treated like smoking

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An economist says many New Zealanders are eating themselves to death and has called for unhealthy eating to be treated in the same way as smoking.

Geoff Simmons from the Morgan Foundation has told the Agencies for Nutrition Action national conference in Auckland that careless eating is costing New Zealanders their health.

He says reduced smoking rates is a New Zealand public health success story, and adopting a similar approach to unhealthy eating will lead to people living longer, healthier lives and lower health costs.

"Diet is a more difficult issue than smoking because we all need to eat, but we need to tackle it with the same motivation if we want people to live long healthy lives and have dignified deaths.

"This means thinking hard about education, taxes, regulation and even stigmatising unhealthy eating."

Mr Simmons says the New Zealand health system is better at treating one-off problems rather than managing ongoing chronic diseases like diabetes, which is on a dramatic rise. The number of people with diabetes is predicted to double by 2021.

"This means we don't spend money keeping people healthy when they are young, which is far more effective. Instead we pump money into keeping people alive for two or three more months at the end of their lives."

He says while deaths from heart disease and stroke are coming down, diabetes is on the rise and diet is still the major cause of death in New Zealand.

"We need to take action, which either means doing some things that may impact on personal liberty, such as regulation and taxes on certain foods, or we need to get people to take responsibility for themselves – ideally both.

"The wealthy and healthy are the ones that whinge about New Zealand becoming a 'nanny' state, but the way we are going there won't be enough room in the hospital for them when they come to need treatment themselves."

He says projections suggest that investing \$60 million a year now on diabetes prevention could save \$370 million a year by 2021.

The Morgan Foundation will release a book later this year on the impact of food on our health as a nation - a follow up to its 2009 book *Health Cheque*, about the New Zealand public health system. *Health Cheque* called for a substantial, independent body to oversee all changes to healthcare spending, limit how much is spent on end of life treatment and shift funding towards prevention.

“It would need to have input from health professionals and the public, and take responsibility for educating people about the reasons for the change in approach, in the way that PHARMAC has done a good job of changing the way we look at spending on drugs,” says Mr Simmons.

“Independence is crucial to avoid political meddling and bring about an overall improvement in New Zealanders’ health.”

Ends



Geoff Simmons

Geoff Simmons is an economist working for the Morgan Foundation – an independent foundation sponsoring public interest research in New Zealand. Geoff co-authored books “Health Cheque: The truth we should all know about New Zealand’s public health system” and “A Prescription for Change: A follow up to Health Check”, alongside New Zealand economist, philanthropist and fund manager Gareth Morgan.

Their current project includes a look at nutrition and what we need to do as a society to maximise the health benefits (or minimise the costs) of the food we eat.