

## ***Diane Robertson: Healthy diet not an option for the poor***

NZ Herald

Wednesday November 22, 2006

Tackling New Zealand's "obesity epidemic" and related escalating health problems is firmly on the Government's agenda.

For years, public health messages about the need for lifestyle changes - eating less and exercising more, and substituting high-fat and high-sugar "fast foods" with a nutritious diet - have come at us from billboards, newspapers and magazines, radio and television.

The message has been clear - eat healthy food and keep your weight down or you are likely to develop a range of unpleasant, life-threatening and costly (to the state) illnesses.

Now the Government has announced a four-year \$67 million campaign in a further attempt to deal with obesity. Dubbed "Mission On", the campaign includes improving nutrition in schools and early childhood centres; more school, internet and television promotion of healthy food (and encouraging the advertising industry to reduce marketing of unhealthy food to children); and a new celebrity "lifestyle ambassadors" campaign.

All this emphasis on encouraging people to eat less and eat healthily is good. But where is the Government commitment to those for whom the problem is too little food? To the families who do not have enough money left to feed themselves after paying rent and other fixed costs? To the children who arrive at school hungry and with no lunch?

It is widely acknowledged that nutrition is a key determinant of health. Certain groups in the community are deprived of a healthy diet because they cannot afford it.

As household spending becomes prioritised, food quantity and/or quality is often sacrificed as it is usually the only unfixed component of the weekly household budget.

The University of Otago monitors annually the cost of a healthy diet based on food and nutrition guidelines. The 2006 figures for Auckland are: for an adult male, basic \$50, liberal \$78; adult female, basic \$48, liberal \$75; adolescent male, basic \$64, liberal \$99; adolescent female, basic \$53, liberal \$83; 10-year-old, basic \$41; liberal \$64.

The Auckland City Mission sees families who have only \$11 left for food for each person each week. They do not have ready and constant access to affordable and nutritious food. These families have no hope of achieving a healthy diet.

The voluntary welfare sector plays a critical role in meeting the food needs of vulnerable people. Food bank usage is a good indication of the prevalence of poverty in the community.

The rise of food banks paralleled the neo-liberal economic and welfare restructuring of the late 1980s and 90s, which led to increased hardship and poverty. And it came with widening income inequalities and large numbers of people on low incomes struggling to cover basic living expenses.

Such trends have continued beyond the 90s, despite substantial Government anti-poverty strategies.

The 1997 National Nutrition Survey found that 13 per cent of New Zealanders reported their household could only sometimes afford to eat properly, while 14 per cent of New Zealanders reported food ran out in their household because of lack of money.

And the demand for food bank services has continued to grow - probably because, according to the New Zealand Living Standards Report released in July, the economic upturn has brought little change for the bottom 20 per cent.

The report, by the Ministry of Social Development, shows a million New Zealanders living in hardship, and 250,000 of these coping with severe hardship. A disproportionate number of those affected are children.

The last five years have seen an increase in food bank usage at the Auckland City Mission, from 3176 food parcels given out July-June 2001-2002 to 5446 for July-June 2005-2006.

And this represents only the tip of the iceberg of food insecurity. Many people may not use a food bank because there is not one in their area; because they may not meet eligibility criteria; or because of cultural and social factors such as embarrassment, language barriers or unfamiliar food being offered.

The problems of poverty and families going without food is largely structural. Improvements and changes need to be made to the economic and political system that has led to the growth of poverty and food banks.

Real disposable incomes need to increase for those reliant on the state for income assistance and for the working poor. The Government's recent \$1.8 billion Working for Families package does not provide additional assistance for beneficiary households and low-income workers without children.

Affordable housing is crucial. This can be achieved through increased subsidised housing for those most in need. The fear of being evicted, having power disconnected and/or goods repossessed means food is often sacrificed.

And the affordability of healthy foods must be ensured. This could be partially achieved through the removal of GST on healthy foods.

It has been suggested that many food bank clients require basic education on healthy eating and living. We can all benefit from information on how to live a healthy life. However, education cannot solve the problem of lack of income.

So much money is going into education. It would be great to see some of the Government's "Mission On" money given to organisations which have been on a mission for years (with no Government help) to make sure children have enough to eat.

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