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Preventative Health Response – Submission to Preventative Health Task Force

COTA Over 50s acknowledges the importance of the identified areas requiring urgent preventative health action – obesity, smoking, harmful drinking, Indigenous life expectancy.

However, our concern for preventative health action – which includes the nominated priorities – extends to actions that are particularly important for older people. With people 65 and older making up a major group using health services, and with their proportion of the population nearing 20% and growing, it is important to ensure that this significant population group maintain their health and independence throughout most, if not all of their last two-three decades of life.

COTA approaches preventative health policy through the framework of a commitment to active ageing, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles and interventions that enable older Australians to age well and age in place. We recognise that the determinants of health are biological and behavioural but also social and environmental and consequently preventive action must foster not just healthy lifestyles but also healthy environments and social inclusion.

To that end, COTA Over 50s recommends that the Taskforce attend to the following considerations in scoping a broad preventative health policy:

- Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease and infirmity. The responsibility of individuals is to maintain a healthy lifestyle; the responsibility of Government is to create a supportive environment that enables the advancement of health and wellbeing into old age by facilitating healthy choices by individuals and ensuring provision of diverse community support options.
- Health is not merely a medical issue. It is as much a function of people's physical environment, social connectedness, economic circumstances, access to services and family support as it is the availability of clean water, decent food and pharmaceuticals and effective medical interventions.
- Health promotion activities and equal access of older persons to preventative health care and services throughout life is the cornerstone of healthy ageing. A life course perspective involves recognizing that health promotion and disease prevention activities need to focus on maintaining independence, prevention and delay of disease and disability.
- Oral health plays an important role in the health and well-being of older people. Poor dental health can indirectly lead to chronic conditions that prevent people from

normal activities such as chewing and speaking. Periodontal disease can lead to a range of medical conditions including coronary heart disease, stroke, peripheral vascular disease and pancreatic cancer. The indirect cost of poor dental health associated with these four medical conditions is estimated at \$412 million per annum (2005/06 prices).

- Increasing muscle and bone fitness improves health and reduces the risk of falls and other injuries, of disability and chronic disease among older people. Musculoskeletal diseases are common in older age, and substantial benefits can be achieved through even modest exercise involving resistance training. Such exercise is also effective in protecting against respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Initiatives such as COTA's *Living Longer, Living Stronger* program warrant increased support, and urban design that facilitates exercise should be encouraged.
- Malnutrition and poor nutrition also place older persons at disproportionate risk, adversely affecting their health and vitality. Ready access to support and advice from dietitians, and effective public education around matters of nutrition are essential. So too is equitable access to plentiful and affordable fruit and vegetables.
- Mental health is an area of particular significance for people as they age. Mental wellbeing is strongly influenced by the nature of people's social environment, and the capacity to function as autonomous, independent citizens. Poor economic circumstances, ill-maintained housing and neighbourhoods and exclusion from participation are corrosive of good mental health. Public policy must be effective across all these arenas if levels of mental illness amongst older Australians are to be minimised.
- While there is much yet to be learned about dementia, the protective value of physical activity is known. In addition education and mental tasks are beneficial as are a balanced diet and social contact. Consequently, facilitation of exercise and also provision of a range of opportunities for lifelong learning and social interaction should be high priorities.

COTA Over 50s therefore recommends that the Preventative Health Taskforce pursue the following courses of action:

- Develop and promote early interventions to prevent, delay and/or reduce the impact of, the onset of disease and disability using a life course perspective.
- Encourage older persons to maintain or adopt an active and healthy lifestyle, including physical activity and sport or exercise, and ensure that the requisite infrastructure and services are available and suited to people of all ages.
- Provide training and incentives for health and social service and care professionals to counsel and guide persons reaching old age on healthy lifestyles and self-care.
- Ensure that gender-specific primary prevention and screening programmes are available and affordable to older persons.
- Develop and deliver effective health promotion programs to reach specific disadvantaged CALD groups through tailored approaches that take into consideration the particular linguistic and cultural context of the targeted group. By 2011 one in

every five people aged 70 and over will be from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background.

- Pay attention to the dangers arising from social isolation and mental illness and reduce the risk they pose to the health of older persons by supporting community empowerment and mutual aid groups, including peer outreach and neighbourhood visiting programmes and by facilitating the active participation of older persons in social and voluntary activities.
- Promote civic, cultural and lifelong learning participation of older persons as strategies to combat social isolation and support empowerment and delay the onset of dementia.
- Rigorously implement and reinforce, where applicable, national and international safety standards that aim at preventing injuries at all ages.