Dietitians welcome global move away from BMI, but urge caution around focusing on body size as an indicator of health

Dietitians Australia welcomes the global discussion sparked following the release of the Lancet Commission's definition and diagnostic criteria of clinical obesity – as an opportunity to continue the conversation urgently needed in the global healthcare community to ensure people, regardless of their body size, receive the healthcare they need.

The peak body for dietetic and nutrition professionals in Australia is cautioning health professionals not to overemphasise body size and shape to indicate health, insisting the focus must be on conducting robust, holistic individual assessments to ensure people receive supportive healthcare.

"People deserve access to the healthcare they need when they need it– regardless of their body size," Dietitians Australia's President Dr Fiona Willer said.

"Body size may inform part of the planning for that care, but it really shouldn't be the primary target of any treatment they need,"

"While we welcome the approach to be more modern– including adding a suite of options beyond BMI, we really must be extremely cognisant of the impact of pathologising body size.

“It is so important as health professionals we continue to ensure we treat the whole person.

“We know people living in larger bodies going to see their healthcare professionals with a health concern are at risk of having their concern ignored or incorrectly attributed to their body weight.

“We must ensure that proper duty of care is taken in every circumstance, and this includes further investigations being undertaken to identify an individual’s condition or concern, including malnutrition and eating disorders, even when presenting in a larger body size.

“You can’t tell how healthy someone’s eating patterns are by what they look like, and this is something dietitians in Australia are very attuned with.

“Modern dietetics in Australia involves taking a holistic view, beyond only assessing nutrition and food intake and beyond body shape and size.

“In addition to other clinical measures, dietitians review eating habits, counsel people to understand behaviours, cultural requirements, beliefs and customs, as well as daily routines and individual preferences – and comprehensively support people with their nutrition intake on a personalised basis.

“We welcome the Commission’s report emphasising the importance of lifestyle assessments, dietitians are the most skilled healthcare professional when it comes to assessing dietary intake as part of a comprehensive lifestyle assessment.

“Wherever there are conversations in the provision of healthcare, involving whether a person’s body size has a relation to their health status, a dietitian must be brought into the picture.
“If a person is given or prescribed a long-term medical treatment that affects their ability to eat, they must also be supported by a dietitian to ensure they avoid malnutrition.

“More broadly, we must also focus on the urgent need for health-promoting policy measures and actions in Australia that better empower people to adopt health-supporting behaviours and eating patterns.

“We are hopeful this marks the start of meaningful change when it comes to providing comprehensive healthcare for people living in larger bodies.

For media enquiries and interviews, contact our Media Manager on 0409 661 920.

Note to Editors: Dietitians Australia is the leading voice in nutrition and dietetics, representing dietitians nationally and advocating for healthier communities. Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) is the only national credential recognised by the Australian Government as the quality

standard for nutrition and dietetics services in Australia.