

National Press Club Address

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How Australia Can Lead the World Against Chronic Disease

Thank you Tom, distinguished guests, members of the National Press Club, ladies and gentlemen.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we meet today and pay my respects to Elders past and present.

At Novo Nordisk, we recognise the deep connection First Nations peoples have to Country, a connection nurtured for more than 65,000 years.

Let me begin with a fact that should stop every Australian in their tracks.

According to the Health and Wellbeing Queensland Report, a child born in Queensland today may have a lifespan four to five years less than their parents.¹

Not because of war. Not because of famine. But because of obesity.

Five years. That's 1,825 days of time lost with loved ones.

And it's not some distant threat—it's happening right now to this generation.

Living with overweight and obesity is more than carrying extra weight.

It's the gateway to chronic disease, contributing to the burden of 30 other health conditions including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular, cancers, and chronic kidney disease.²

Chronic disease has become the health challenge of the century.

So, where does my company come in?

I joined Novo Nordisk more than 30 years ago as an office clerk in Vienna.

Since then, I've had the privilege of leading operations across some of the world's most challenging markets, from the Middle East to Southeast Asia.

But here's what makes Novo Nordisk different, and why I believe we're well positioned to help Australia tackle this crisis.

We're not a typical pharmaceutical company.

More than 70% of Novo Nordisk is controlled by the Novo Nordisk Foundation — one of the world's largest non-profit organisations dedicated to funding long-term solutions that improve people's health and the sustainability of society and the planet.

This allows us to take a long view, in terms of patient outcomes, in terms of delivering innovation to people who need our support.

This year marks Novo Nordisk's 50th anniversary in Australia, a half-century of commitment to delivering medicines to more than 1.6 million Australians living with diabetes, obesity, and rare diseases.³

At this point, I want to also acknowledge that the Australian Government recently released their 10 year National Strategic Framework for Chronic Conditions.⁴

This Framework provides a comprehensive roadmap for exactly the kind of collaborative action I'll outline today.

What I'm proposing supports the Framework's vision for prevention, multidisciplinary care, and enhanced support for priority populations.

Now, let me share why I believe Australia, more than any other nation, can solve the health challenge of the century.

First, it's worth setting out what we're dealing with here:

- 15.4 million Australians live with at least one chronic health condition.⁵
- Chronic conditions contribute to 90% of all deaths.⁶

And here's what makes this even more complex:

9.7 million Australians, or 38% of the population, live with multimorbidity.⁷

This isn't just about managing one disease. It's about people navigating clinicians, multiple medications, and fragmented care systems.

Managing this problem requires a coordinated approach across the entire health system, not siloed condition-by-condition treatment.

In their current form, Australia's health and financial systems are not designed to support this burden.

Now, let me zero in on obesity briefly.

I've just thrown a lot of figures and statistics at you, but here is another key number to remember today. 13 million.⁸

That's how many adult Australians are currently living with overweight and obesity.

That is every person in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane combined. Ranking you 10th highest in OECD.⁹

To drive home the significance of the problem, the rate of obesity alone has tripled over the last 45 years.¹⁰

As I mentioned moments ago, living with overweight and obesity is about more than carrying extra weight. It's the gateway to chronic disease.²

And chronic disease is no longer just a health concern.

It is a direct threat to productivity, economic stability, and social wellbeing.

Chronic diseases, and those linked to obesity, fuel disability, time off work, and early retirement.¹¹

Workforce health directly shapes a nation's ability to grow, compete and attract investment.

Healthier employees mean greater workforce participation, longer careers, and stronger businesses.

Chronic disease also carries direct costs with 54% of all disease spending goes towards it.¹²

Spending on chronic conditions sits at around \$98 billion and climbing.¹²

Unless something changes, 3 federal elections from now you'll be looking at a number that makes today's figures look modest.

Of course, chronic disease is a global crisis, not just an Australian one.

The World Obesity Federation warns that by 2030, the global economic toll of overweight and obesity could exceed \$3 trillion US dollars.¹³

But here is another way to look at it. The McKinsey Health Institute, claims that investing in workforce health could lift global GDP by as much as 12%, translating into trillions in economic value.¹⁴

Australia has the potential not only to capture this value but also to lead by example on the world stage.

Now you may be thinking: "Here comes another pharmaceutical CEO to tell us medicines are the answer."

But that's not my message because medicine alone will not solve the chronic disease crisis.

I am here to propose something far more ambitious.

I believe Australia can become the world's first country to truly bend the obesity-led chronic disease curve.

Not just manage it. Not just treat it. But actually prevent it, at scale.

And I believe Australia has everything needed to do so.

Why? Because you have done it before. Several times in fact.

In 2012, Australia replaced colourful cigarette packs with plain brown boxes featuring graphic health warnings, despite strong opposition by the tobacco industry.

The policy helped reduce smoking rates.¹⁵

It became a global model for tobacco control, influencing over 20 countries.¹⁵

Turning to disease prevention, Australia's HPV vaccination program also stands as a global healthcare success story and a model for cancer prevention worldwide.

Your national program was quickly implemented. And adolescent vaccination rates have been, until recently, consistently above 80%.¹⁶

You are now set to be the first country to eliminate cervical cancer as a public health issue.¹⁷

These are inspiring examples of Australia as a global trailblazer.

The question is, can Australia, once again, be the first to crack a public health problem that has proved so intractable.

So, what will it take?

The reality is the government cannot solve the health challenge of the century alone.

It is bigger than any public purse.

No single actor can solve the complex interlinked challenges of health, national competitiveness, and workforce productivity.

It will require a coordinated approach among multiple stakeholders to work in concert and create lasting solutions.

This is the approach at the heart of what I view as the Australian Made model.

A model that would be founded on the principles of collaboration.

An approach that embodies the value of a Fair Go.

The partnership would focus on two key platforms: Prevent Today and Protect Tomorrow.

I'm sure we can all agree that with millions of Australians living with obesity-led chronic disease, we cannot ask them to wait.

They need help today. We urgently need to perfect the system for the next generation.

Prevent Today would focus on 3 things:

Firstly, expand access to treatment.

In principle, this means actively reforming the PBS process to eliminate the wait time of 466 days to access innovative medicine.¹⁸

It also means proposing a dedicated Health budget for obesity, separate from the PBS, using HTA frameworks for implementation.

Secondly, reform upstream policies.

Modernise food labelling and enforce responsible marketing.

Encourage healthier habits by introducing fiscal policies that promote nutritious consumption and support initiatives for improved food selection in public institutions.

Finally, create healthy places.

Proactively co-design walkable cities with transport infrastructure and mandate green spaces into urban planning.

Moving to the second element of the partnership model, we also need to ensure that the next generation never faces a similar crisis again.

By that I mean we need to Protect Tomorrow.

If we intervene early, before patterns are entrenched and before disease takes hold, we can improve health for the next generation.

Protect Tomorrow focuses on 3 elements:

Firstly, school support.

Create environments where children grow up surrounded by healthy norms.

A future where nutrition education is embedded in curriculum and schools prioritise movement.

Secondly, community engagement.

Ensure communities have access to playgrounds and sports facilities in every postcode.

Food insecurity and affordability are addressed and culturally responsive programs are co-created.

Finally, digital Infrastructure.

Build digital systems to link primary care, hospitals, and community services to guide care and track outcomes across a child's lifetime.

While a partnership model such as Prevent Today and Protect Tomorrow might strike you as aspirational, it can start, as it often does, with small steps.

Let me tell you about Logan in Queensland.

Logan is one of the state's fastest growing regions.¹⁹

Its rapid growth is intensifying pressure on families who face limited access to healthy food.

This is an issue that is reflected nationally, where 13% of the households' experience food insecurity.²⁰

That's why Novo Nordisk recently launched the FEEL GOOD FUTURES program in Logan.

It's a \$3 million health and wellbeing initiative that aims to increase quality of life, physical activity, and access to nourishing food for children in the region.²¹

This is part of our global Cities for Better Health program, which uses a preventative approach in six cities across six countries through partnerships.²²

What makes the Logan program special is not just the investment; it's that families designed it on their own.

This approach ensures health information and programs are accessible, relevant, and useful.

While it's Logan today, it could be your city tomorrow.

In an ideal world, every major Australian urban center becomes a hub for change.

Now, you might ask, "What's in this for Novo Nordisk?"

Let me be clear about our role.

As I've explained, our ownership structure means we have a history of taking the long view.

We can invest in prevention, and we can work to support the overall health and prosperity of a country over time – something that is in everyone's long-term interest – including ours.

So, here is what I will commit to you today.

This afternoon we will sign a partnership with Heart of Australia focusing on rural Queensland to improve the early detection of chronic liver disease, a condition for which obesity is a risk factor.²³

Heart of Australia is an innovative mobile healthcare delivery provider that brings specialist healthcare and testing directly to people that need them the most.

Imagine a grandmother in remote Queensland getting a liver scan without traveling 500 kilometers to Brisbane. That's what this partnership delivers.

Also later today, we will sign a Memorandum of Understanding with Murdoch Children's Research Institute to fund a 3 year program on adolescent obesity in Pacific Island nations.

This will be a key research initiative for the region.

Pacific Island nations have some of the highest obesity rates globally, accounting for nine of the ten countries with the highest adult prevalence worldwide.²⁴

But by engaging young people, their families, clinicians and policymakers, the program will guide youth-focused recommendations that we believe will positively reshape their future.

In addition, we're committing to co-design and co-fund pilot programs with Australian governments, clinicians, employers, and researchers.

We remain committed to investing in Australian research and development focused on prevention and integrated chronic care, including generating real-world evidence.

Over the past five years, we have invested almost \$100 million in local clinical trials that have included approximately 1,400 Australian patients.²⁵

The number of active trials has doubled, and we expect an additional 500 patients to participate in our trials this year.²⁵

What I hope these examples demonstrate is that addressing the health challenge of the century requires multiple solutions delivered via multiple partnerships.

Without them, the Australian Made model cannot succeed.

There is another very important factor to consider.

This isn't just about prevention, although prevention alone would justify the effort.

This is about economic opportunities.

Opportunities, such as building a health innovation sector, that can export Australian expertise globally, cementing your leadership and intellectual property in prevention, digital health, and integrated care.

Because by improving population health, you will reduce healthcare costs and create a more productive workforce.

Boosting local economies and supporting longer workforce participation.

And there's also a moral imperative that cannot be ignored.

We're talking about preventable suffering.

We're talking about productive years taken from people who should be contributing to their families, their communities, and their nation.

We're talking about children who, for the first time in modern history, may live shorter lives than their parents.

If there is to be any chance of solving the health challenge of the century, the status quo must change.

It is critical that prevention is moved out of the shadows and into the economic mainstream.

So, here's what I'm proposing:

If you represent the Government at any level, I'd like to recommend the following:

- Take the blueprint from the National Strategic Framework and apply political will and investment to implement it at scale.
- Make sure to include industry as genuine partner in those efforts, not just a passive supplier.
- Build AI, digital, physical, and social infrastructure so healthy choices are simple.
- Keep rewarding and investing in prevention. Australia currently invests just over 3% of its health spend on prevention.²⁶

Compared with other OECD countries this ranks you ‘mid-table’.

Meaning you spend a bit more than Spain, about the same as France, a bit less than Denmark and considerably less than Canada, the US and the UK.²⁷

- Set ambitious, measurable targets with clear timelines and accountability.

If you are here on behalf of **industry**, such as health, mining, or infrastructure, step up as genuine partners, and co-invest in prevention.

If you are **an employer**, recognise that workforce health is a national economic indicator.

Offer work place health checks, coaching and ensure healthy food and activity options.

If you have responsibilities for **Cities and Communities**, become a hub for change.

Co-design solutions that work in the local context. Pilot projects that people can relate to, and scale them up by sharing best practices.

To Everyone Here Today: Start by getting your health checked.

We are all busy, but small steps can compound into healthier lives and meaningful change.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The 21st century’s defining health challenge isn’t infectious disease. It is chronic disease, and the gateway is obesity.

For too long, the conversation around weight has been clouded by misconception.

Let me be clear: obesity is not a choice.

It is a multifaceted metabolic chronic disease that affects each person differently.

Australia has solved big problems before.

Now it's time to do it again.

Your workforce deserves better than losing productive years to diseases that can be prevented.

Australia's economy deserves better than seeing ever-larger shares of GDP consumed by chronic disease management.

Australia can lead the world in bending the chronic disease curve.

We can, and must, work together to demonstrate that this is achievable through partnership.

At Novo Nordisk, with our 50-year history in this country, and our global expertise, we stand ready to partner with you.

Your national framework has been released. The evidence is clear. The opportunity is now.

At the start of my talk, I shared a sobering fact. A child born in Queensland today could live between four to five years less than their parents.¹

But that doesn't have to be the case.

The future health of Australian children depends on the choices we make now.

The competitiveness of your economy depends on it.

And the world is watching to see if a bold, innovative nation like Australia will lead the way, again.

I am hopeful of the choice Australia will make.

Thank you for your invitation to Address the National Press Club.

I welcome any questions you may have.

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