

Media Release

AWASH supports American Medical Association in the international dispute over salt

1 August 2007

The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) commends a new report from the American Medical Association (AMA) calling for a major reduction in the salt content of processed and restaurant foods. At the same time, AWASH absolutely dismisses claims by the UK Salt Manufacturer's Association that the UK government's salt reduction policy is putting the population at risk.

Chair of AWASH, Dr Bruce Neal, welcomed the AMA report which highlights the substantial public health gains that can be achieved from reductions in salt intake. "There is clear evidence that salt is a major cause of high blood pressure, translating into greatly increased risks of heart attacks and stroke," he said.

"Not nearly enough is being done to reduce salt in people's diets and Australians are consuming far too much. Most are eating well above the 6 grams per day recommended by the Heart Foundation of Australia. A reduction to 6 grams a day would prevent about one fifth of all strokes and heart attacks in Australia each year," said Dr Neal.

An author of the AMA report, Dr Stephen Havas (AMA) said "In the past, people weren't fully cognisant of the fact that most of the salt was coming from restaurant and packaged foods. The message we had been giving to the public - don't use salt at the table, don't use salt when you're cooking - was advice of very limited value, since 80% of people's salt was coming from restaurants and processed foods."

The AMA report reinforces the messages of the Australian 'Drop the Salt!' Campaign launched in May by the Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH). AWASH aims to work with

the Australian food industry to achieve a 25 % reduction in the salt content of processed food over the next five years. During this same period, AWASH will join with key consumer and health organisations, to raise consumer awareness and encourage individuals to take positive steps to reduce their salt intake.

It is now internationally recognised that people need to reduce their salt intakes. A World Health Organization (WHO) report released in April 2007 highlighted the strong scientific evidence for the damage to health caused by eating too much salt. The report called for countries around the globe to urgently adopt national approaches to reduce the salt content of foods.

Despite this, a statement released by the Salt Manufacturers' Association UK, this week, has criticised the UK government's salt reduction strategy. The group says that the current UK policy is putting the population at risk, suggesting that long-term, large-scale controlled trials are required to see if low- salt diet improves life expectancy.

Dr Neal, a Senior Director at The George Institute for International Health, has led several global studies addressing the impact of dietary salt on population health. "The UK government's salt reduction policy is based on sound scientific evidence," he said. "The Salt Manufacturers' claims that such a salt reduction strategy may actually do harm are based on vested interests and ignore the weight of the evidence that links salt to blood pressure and blood pressure to cardiovascular disease."

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If you would like to interview Dr Bruce Neal, please contact:

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Notes to Editors:

1. The AMA report calls for a minimum 50% reduction in sodium levels in processed and restaurant foods over a decade; this reduction would lead to 150,000 fewer deaths in the United States each year. It also highlights increased education and improved labelling as being vital in order for consumers to be able to enjoy a low-salt diet without hassle or limited food choices. Finally, it recommends that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration no longer categorise salt as safe. The report also highlights increased education and improved labelling as being vital in order for consumers to be able to enjoy a low-salt diet without hassle or limited food choices. Dickinson BD, Havas S for the Council on Science and Public Health. Reducing the population burden of cardiovascular disease by reducing sodium intake. *Arch Intern Med* 2007; 167:1460-1468
2. Salt Manufacturers' Association UK: <http://www.saltsense.co.uk/releases/rel020.htm>

3. WHO report *Reducing salt intake in populations*:
<http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/reducingsalt/en/index.html>
4. This press release has been issued by The Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health (AWASH) Secretariat, which coordinates the day-to-day activities of AWASH and takes final responsibility for all outputs from AWASH. The Secretariat is informed by an Advisory Group which comprises a larger group of individuals with expertise in a range of different areas pertinent to the activities of AWASH.
5. AWASH is a growing network of individuals and organisations concerned with salt and its effects on health. The mission of AWASH is to improve the health of Australians by achieving a gradual population-wide reduction in dietary salt consumption that will reduce cardiovascular diseases and other salt-related health problems. Visit www.awash.org.au for more information and for a full list of our advisors and supporters.
6. AWASH will be working to Drop the Salt! (name of their national campaign) by promoting the benefits of salt reduction and engaging the participation of all sectors of the Australian community - this will include industry, schools, consumers, scientists, healthcare workers, governments, regulatory bodies and professional organisations. Regular monitoring of progress towards the goal and careful scrutiny of the development of each strategy will be undertaken throughout the campaign.
7. WASH - In 2006, around 194 medical experts from 48 countries around the world joined together to launch WASH – World Action on Salt and Health – in a concerted effort to reduce dietary salt intake, in order to lower blood pressure globally. AWASH is building on the success of the UK campaign. Visit www.worldactiononsalt.com