

**Education & Health  
Alberta Mackenzie Provincial Council**

**2018.01                    Official Recognition of Obesity as a Chronic Disease**

**Whereas,** despite the World Health Organization’s recognition in 1948, the Canadian Medical Association's declaration in 2015 and the creation of the World Obesity Federation; obesity has not received official recognition as a chronic disease by Health Canada, the provincial/territorial governments, healthcare systems or employers; and

**Whereas,** obesity is defined as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health and it currently affects 1 in 4 adults and 1 in 10 children (roughly 6 million Canadians) and the rates of obesity continue to increase; and

**Whereas,** obesity increases the risk of developing life-threatening conditions impacting our society; and

**Whereas,** the lack of official recognition of obesity as a chronic disease by public and private payers, healthcare systems, the public and media hinders access to safe and effective obesity treatments; therefore, be it

**Resolved,** that the Alberta Mackenzie Provincial Council of The Catholic Women’s League of Canada, in 71<sup>st</sup> annual convention assembled, urge the Alberta Provincial and Northwest Territories governments to officially recognize obesity as a chronic disease.

## **BRIEF: Official Recognition of Obesity as a Chronic Disease**

The World Health Organization in 1948 declared obesity as a disease and currently states that “obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally, with at least 2.8 million people dying each year as a result of being overweight or obese. Once associated with high-income countries, obesity is now also prevalent in low- and middle-income countries.

Governments, international partners, civil society, non-governmental organizations and the private sector all have vital roles to play in contributing to obesity prevention” (Volkov et al).

Obesity “is a major risk factor for non-communicable diseases such as:

- cardiovascular diseases (mainly heart disease and stroke), which were the leading cause of death in 2012;
- diabetes;
- musculoskeletal disorders (especially osteoarthritis – a highly disabling degenerative disease of the joints);
- some cancers (including endometrial, breast, ovarian, prostate, liver, gallbladder, kidney, and colon)” (Obesity and overweight).

The lack of official “recognition of obesity as a chronic disease by public and private payers, healthcare systems, the public and media has a trickle-down effect” (loss of productivity and economic output, premature death, higher divorce rates, higher suicide rates, lower educational levels and hinders access to safe and effective obesity treatments (Report Card; Health Consequences; Hamdy et al).

Obesity is “a chronic, relapsing and progressive disease process,” not unlike diabetes and hypertension (Obesity as a Disease). It is prevalent in both developed and developing countries and affecting Canadian children (1 in 10) as well as Canadian adults (1 in 4) (What is obesity).

“Obesity is a primary disease and the full force of our medical knowledge should be brought to bear on the prevention and treatment of obesity as a primary disease entity” (Mechanick et al).

“Living with obesity can have substantial effects on all aspects of health and well-being” (Mental Health, Mechanical Health, Metabolic Health and Monetary Health) (Health Consequences).

“Obesity is characterized by excess body fat that can threaten or affect your health. Many organizations including the Canadian Obesity Network, the Canadian Medical Association, the American Medical Association and the World Health Organization now recognize obesity to be a chronic disease” (What is obesity).

“Recognizing obesity as a disease may precipitate a shift in thinking of obesity as a lifestyle choice to a medical disease with an accompanying obligation to treat it as other diseases” (P. Rich).

Recognizing obesity as a chronic disease will help change the way the medical community tackles this complex issue that affects approximately “6 million Canadians (far more than people living with diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, chronic lung disease or cancer)” (What is obesity). Declaring obesity a chronic disease will help provide better care, appropriate treatment and allow preventive measures to be put in place (Obesity; Why obesity is a disease).

“Defining obesity as a disease increases society’s responsibility to prevent excess weight gain through population-wide interventions to promote optimum health” (Obesity as a Disease).

Recognizing obesity as a chronic disease may stimulate greater action against the obesity crisis, including public policy, education and awareness, to prevent comorbidities and combat the harmful stigma surrounding obesity (Obesity as a disease).

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### **Action Plan**

1. Write letters to the minister of health with copies to your local member of the legislative assembly urging the provincial and territorial governments to officially recognize obesity as a chronic disease as requested in the resolution.
2. Monitor the provincial and territorial governments' response to the request contained in the resolution.
3. At the individual level, people can:
  - limit energy intake from total fats and sugars;
  - increase consumption of fruit and vegetables, as well as legumes, whole grains and nuts; and
  - engage in regular physical activity (60 minutes a day for children and 150 minutes spread through the week for adults).