



Clinical champion for diabetes nationwide

Dr Brandon Orr-Walker, from Counties Manukau District Health Board, is spearheading change and advocacy in the fight against diabetes and cardiovascular disease throughout New Zealand.

He is one of nine clinical directors appointed by the Government to oversee implementation of a national service framework, or major clinical or service strategy, and to provide advice to the Ministry of Health on their area of clinical expertise.

Dr Orr-Walker is clinical head of endocrinology and diabetes at Middlemore Hospital, Auckland, and clinical director for Counties Manukau District Health Board's (DHB) *Creating a Better Future* programme, which has evolved from *Let's Beat Diabetes*.

Let's Beat Diabetes was a five-year district-wide programme of change to prevent or delay the onset of diabetes, slow disease progression and increase the quality of life for people with diabetes in Counties Manukau. *Creating a Better Future* has expanded the work to include the effects of tobacco and alcohol and the conditions caused by their use.

Dr Orr-Walker's work in the public health system is split between specialist endocrinology and diabetes services, and the planning and funding division of the Counties Manukau DHB.

His interest in diabetes spans prevention, primary and secondary care, sector capacity development and clinical care quality, with special emphasis on high-risk populations.

He has led several research studies, including research into bariatric surgery outcomes for diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and also has a small private practice.

Dr Orr-Walker is a member of the steering group for the implementation of the national Diabetes and Cardiovascular Quality Improvement Plan and was a member of the expert advisory group to develop the plan, as well as the Cardiovascular Disease and Diabetes Guideline Revision team (NZ Guidelines Group). He chairs the Counties Manukau local diabetes team, and is an advisor on clinical audit for the Diabetes Projects Trust.

Other clinical directors advocating in their respective areas are: Dr Ashley Bloomfield – Tobacco Control; Dr John Childs – National Clinical Director, Cancer Programme; Dr Mike Ardagh – Emergency Department Services; Dr Api Talemaitoga – Pacific Health; Dr David Theobald, National Clinical Quality Lead (Gastrointestinal Endoscopy).

Offensive against obesity

Dr Orr-Walker says the range of interventions/initiatives in *Let's Beat Diabetes*, and now *Creating a Better Future*, is guided by the concept that a 'whole society, whole life course, whole family/whanau' approach is required to beat diabetes, and that focused effort must be sustained over decades.

"It's a real team effort, involving a range of disciplines and other health professionals, along with partner organisations and groups of people in the community."

One of the other key people involved with *Creating a Better Future* is public health physician Dr Doone Winnard.

Dr Winnard says her experience in directing interventions under *Creating a Better Future* has reinforced that New Zealand must act to reduce obesity, a prime driver (but not sole predeterminant) of Type 2 diabetes. Obesity is also linked with a number of other serious health conditions, including coronary heart disease, some forms of cancer and arthritis.

A report published last year showed New Zealanders are the third heaviest in the developed world.

The report compared the 30 countries monitored by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

It put New Zealand's overall obesity rate at 26.5 percent, behind Mexico at 30 percent and the United States at 33.8 percent. Of all the health districts in the country, Counties Manukau is the heaviest, with an obesity rate of 33 percent. A further 34 percent of the health district is overweight.

While it's well known that obesity is linked to heart disease, strokes and Type 2 diabetes, Dr Orr-Walker says people underestimate the health consequences of their weight. Initial findings from last year's *Living with Diabetes* survey showed many people also had significant misconceptions about their body weight.

"We showed that people of all ethnicities in the Counties Manukau region with diabetes thought they were not overweight or obese, when that clearly wasn't the case," he said.

"Asking them their height and weight and using their answers, you end up showing a large number of them that they were, in fact, overweight or obese."

Obesity is not a cosmetic issue but a medical problem that has become 'normalised' for many people.

Dr Winnard says many factors are involved, including a general lack of awareness about the consequences of obesity, environmental factors, and social influences.

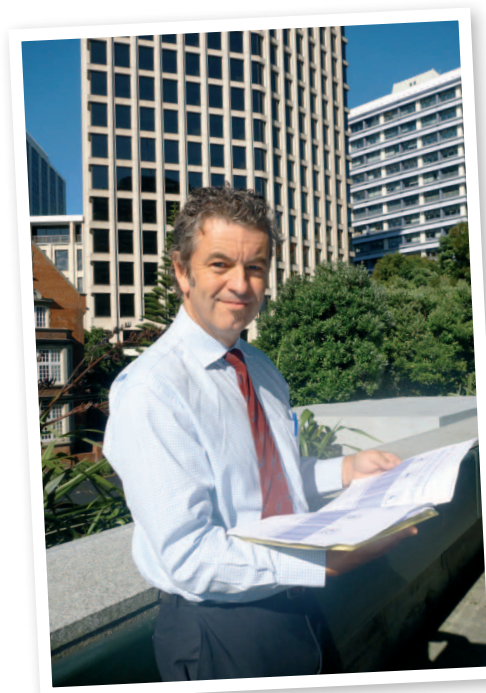
For example, when one in four Pacific people over the age of 35 has diabetes, "that's normal – just not a good normal".

"People may be comparing themselves to others in their family or peer group who are obese and think they're a normal weight."

Dr Winnard stresses the importance of the physical and social environment in determining the quantity and quality of people's food intake and their physical activity.

"People's choices are shaped by what is easily available and affordable. Unfortunately, for many people whose choices are about getting by from day to day, the problem of obesity will get worse unless we do more to support healthier choices.

"Around four years ago people were asking what obesity was – now people understand what the word means.



Dr Orr-Walker prepares before a briefing with the Minister in his advisory role to the Ministry of Health.

"One of the next steps is people recognising the risk in themselves so they can start to think about making the different changes to their lives. Eating a healthy diet, increasing physical activity, and being a healthy weight can reduce the risk of diabetes and other obesity-related conditions."

Pacific people are New Zealand's 'canary in the mine' for obesity-related disease: in years past, workers underground would take a canary down the mine shaft. The canary was more sensitive to low oxygen levels than the miners so, when the oxygen levels dipped, the canary died.

"Pacific people, like the canary, are responding to changes in the environment faster than other populations," explains Dr Orr-Walker. "People from the Pacific Islands have the highest rates of Type 2 diabetes of all ethnic groups in New Zealand, and among the highest rates worldwide.

"The risk of developing Type 2 diabetes is increasing for all populations but rates of Pacific people suffering have become so high that the condition is commonplace among Pacific families in New Zealand.

"Change needs to happen, and needs to happen quickly for all people. And it definitely needs to happen for our Pacific people.

"Preventing, delaying or managing Type 2 diabetes better includes working at reducing that extra fat around the stomach through physical activity and by making healthier choices about the size of meals we eat, and eating less saturated fats and high-sugar foods and drinks, including takeaways and fizzy drinks." ●