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Call to make obese pay

Janelle Miles

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HEALTH insurers should be able to charge obese people higher premiums, an economist says.

Queensland University of Technology's Paul Frijters said introducing a user pays principle was the best way to curb the escalating costs of the obesity epidemic on the health system.

Professor Frijters urged the Federal Government to lift restrictions on health insurance companies to ask questions about a person's weight and allow them to calculate increased premiums based on body mass index.

"Why should the whole population basically pay for the preventable actions which other people choose?" he said.

About 16 per cent of Australian men and 17 per cent of women are considered obese.

Obesity has been linked to a number of life-threatening conditions such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease.

"There's a much heavier use of medicine and there's much heavier use of hospital care by obese people," Professor Frijters said. "Obesity is so closely related to lifestyle choices and the costs associated with it are becoming so great that it's no longer tenable to simply gloss over it."

Professor Frijters said a similar argument could apply to smokers.

"But . . . smoking is generally going down in the population whilst obesity is going up so it's a more pressing problem," he said.

A spokesman for a group of health professionals who recently formed the Obesity Prevention and Treatment Society said obesity should be treated as an illness, not a self-discipline problem.

"Obesity is a psycho-physiological condition that has a level of complexity that exceeds many other conditions that we don't penalise in this way," psychiatrist George Blair-West said.

"The majority of obese people know what they should do to lose weight but the psychological complexities are such that they're unable to do this.

"Simply punishing people . . . is not going to solve the problem."

Dr Blair-West said because obesity was more prevalent in lower socioeconomic groups, increasing health premiums on the basis of weight would place the cost burden on the people least able to afford it.

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