



MONASH University

**Study Contact:** Dr Samantha Thomas  
Centre for Ethics in Medicine and Society

Ph: 0417 355 871

[Samantha.thomas@med.monash.edu.au](mailto:Samantha.thomas@med.monash.edu.au)

[www.cems.monash.org](http://www.cems.monash.org)

**Being “fat” in today’s world  
Problems, possibilities and new departures**

Background

Obesity is a significant cause of physical and mental health problems around the world. Attempts to prevent and to treat the condition have so far been of limited success. It is increasingly recognised that the reason for this is the great complexity of the problem, which is generated and perpetuated by a wide range of individual, cultural, societal, and biological factors.

Recent research conducted by our Centre has highlighted many concerns raised by overweight individuals regarding medical and public health approaches to obesity. Overweight people often face stigmatisation and discrimination; they may lack confidence or experience actual depressive illnesses; there are special issues that arise in particular cultural or ethnic settings; and the representations of obesity in the popular media often reinforce harmful stereotypes and further limit opportunities for constructive remedial strategies. Furthermore, our research has shown that whilst people who are overweight repeatedly turn to diets to address their weight, they find it extremely difficult to engage in physical activity.

Because overweight individuals often feel disempowered careful consideration needs to be given to the types of models used to promote changes over time. The development of these models should take place in consultation with the overweight people themselves and their further refinement should be based on well founded, rigorous research.

The ARC project

*Overview*

This project explores the lived experiences of 350 people in Victoria who are classified as obese, and investigates how public messages about obesity are received and interpreted these individuals. The research will provide a rich source of data which recognizes and reflects on the deep poignancy of the experiences of people who live with obesity. The research findings will be readily interpretable to a wide range of health professionals, including those working in public health, health promotion, and clinical practice. a large scale qualitative approach allows us to look at collections of individual experiences in order to identify where to target different health messages and interventions in different ways. The comprehensive analysis of media reporting of obesity, coupled with a policy



scan, will enable us to recommend messages for use in media, social marketing and more direct health promotions. As a result the research will lead to a deeper understanding of obesity and contribute to improved programs that address the actual needs of individual 'clusters' of overweight and obese individuals. The research will begin in 2008 and conclude in December 2010.

## *Aims*

1. To categorize and analyze the narratives of people who are overweight and obese, with a view to identifying factors that lead to obesity and opportunities to support weight loss and healthier living;
2. To investigate how narratives differ between specific sub-populations, and to characterize those differences that are due to health inequalities;
3. To investigate whether there is a direct or indirect link between a person's obesity and their mental health and, if so, whether that link reflects a social gradient;
4. To develop strategies and guidelines that may change the way in which Public Health interventions are designed and implemented taking into account the lived reality of people who are obese;
5. To recommend messages that will be able to be used in media and social marketing campaigns and more direct health promotion campaigns, and which reflect the poignancy of the experiences of people with obesity.

## *Key Phases:*

**Phase 1** will include a literature and policy scan;

**Phase 2** will qualitatively explore the lived experiences of people who are overweight and or obese

**Phase 3** will be a media representation and reception study to explore how issues relating to obesity and healthy weight are reported and received by people who are overweight or obese.

Phases 1-3 will run concurrently to maximize the time dedicated to each issue during the grant.

**Phase 4** will be a period of consolidation, dissemination of study outcomes, and development of policy recommendations and media strategies. Policy recommendations will be developed from the outcomes of the qualitative study, and media representation and reception study and will run in Year Three after phases 1-3 have been completed and analysed.



MONASH University

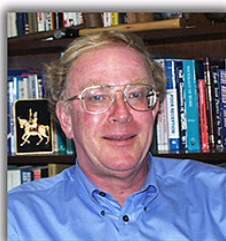
Chief Investigators



**Prof Paul Komesaroff** (Director CEMS). Paul Komesaroff is a practicing physician and Professor within the Faculty of Medicine at Monash University. He has an international reputation in health care ethics, and has a major impact on the field of clinical ethics in Australia. He has extensive developed expertise in both qualitative and quantitative investigations of the social and cultural dimensions of health and health care, which has led to over 250 peer reviewed articles and 10 books, and extensive national and international collaborations. As a physician, his field of specialty is endocrinology. He is also Ethics Convener of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, Convener of the Global Reconciliation Network, Chair of the Health and Development and Alliance, and Chair of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Bioethical Inquiry. He is responsible for the Clinical Obesity Service at the Alfred Hospital.



**Prof David Castle:** David Castle is one of the leading academic Psychiatrists in Australasia. He is currently Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Melbourne, Honorary Professorial Research Fellow at the Mental Health Research Institute of Victoria, and Consultant Psychiatrist at St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne. Prof Castle's clinical and academic work spans a number of key areas in relation to this study proposal. In particular his work looking at the experiences of weight gain in people living with mental illness, gives him a unique insight into the experiences of more vulnerable sub-populations who may face, at times sudden, weight gain. His special interests in disorders of body image; obsessive-compulsive spectrum disorders; women's mental health, and approaches to the treatment of anxiety disorders are central in examining the mental health of people living with obesity, and whether or not there is a connection between peoples overweight and their mental health.



**Prof Warwick Blood** is Professor of Communication in the School of Professional Communication, University of Canberra, Australia. He teaches communication research methods and health communication. His research interests are in risk communication theory and practice, media representations and analyses, and public opinion research. He is currently completing research funded by the Australian Research Council that investigates the changing dynamics and hotly contested interplay between media, journalistic, medical, health professional and lay discourses about suicide and mental illness news. He serves on the Editorial Advisory Board for the Australian Journal of Communication and



MONASH University

for the Australian Journal of Professional and Applied Ethics. He was Editor of the Australian Journalism Review from 1998 to 2000. He was elected President of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association for 1995-96. (Vice-President, 1994-95).



**Dr Samantha Thomas** (Deputy Director CEMS). Samantha Thomas is a medical sociologist and epidemiologist and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre. She has a unique skill mix and a wide range of practical, policy and research experience in health care. Samantha initially worked at addressing social problems and health inequalities at the grassroots and policy levels internationally in the Pacific, Africa and Eastern Europe, before working at the World Health Organisation in Geneva. Her research involves the social and cultural dimensions of health and wellbeing, with particular emphasis on community engagement strategies. Her research on the lived experience of obesity has attracted widespread media, government and academic interest. She comments regularly in print, television media about approaches to obesity in Australia.



**Dr Jim Hyde** Jim Hyde is an Honorary Associate within the Centre for Ethics in Medicine and Society. His career has focused on the development of achievable strategies for the implantation of evidence based policy. Dr Hyde is particularly interested in primary prevention and health promotion approaches and interventions and has strong networks within the public sector. He has been a regular media commentator and a columnist for the Sydney Morning Herald, as well as the media spokesperson in a number of positions he has held. His previous positions include Director of Policy and Communications, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (2001-5); Director, Health Services Policy for NSW Health; and CEO of the Victorian AIDS Council. In 2007 he was appointed Director of Public Health, DHS Victoria.