

Govt gives pensioners Xmas sweetener

Like many pensioners Phillipa White has watched her savings dwindle as she tries to make ends meet on \$280 a week.

So for the 69-year-old single aged pensioner the \$1,400 lump sum payment she will receive before Christmas from the government is welcome news.

"I have been going backwards, just like a lot of pensioners I know," Ms White told AAP.

"I'm in debt to my savings practically every fortnight and I'm not living extravagantly by any means.

"This payment before Christmas will be very handy, it will help replace what I have taken from my savings to pay the bills."

Ms White is one of four million pensioners, carers and families who will benefit under the government's \$4.8 billion package announced.

It forms part of a \$10.4 billion stimulus package designed to help Australia counter the global economic crisis.

Single-aged pensioners will receive lump sum payments of \$1,400 and couples \$2,100 in December.

People on disability support and veterans pensions, carer payments and low-income self-funded retirees will also be eligible. Carer Allowance recipients will receive a \$1,000 payment for each person in their care. This payment will also be given to families

receiving Family Tax Benefit Part A or with children on Youth Allowance, Abstudy or a veterans education benefit. Families Minister Jenny Macklin said these people would be able to rest "a little easier" in the lead-up to Christmas.

"This is a very important day for all of these pensioners, for veterans, for carers because they do need immediate support," Ms Macklin told parliament.

"They can have a little bit extra to make sure that all the extra costs that they face will be easier for them as Christmas comes."

Ms Macklin said the government was also committed to long-term pension reform and would act on the recommendations of its pension review next year.

The federal opposition, minor parties, pension senior and carer groups have all welcomed the package.

But Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull said it would have been preferable if it was done out of compassion rather than to stimulate the economy. The coalition has been demanding a \$30-a-week increase for single aged pensioners.

"It's not something to lament unduly, but it is a fact I think that the only reason pensioners have got what they deserve was because the prime minister concluded there was a need for a fiscal stimulus," Mr Turnbull said.

"What was really needed was not just an injection of liquidity into the system but an injection of compassion."

Seniors Australia CEO Michael O'Neill said pensioners would be able to buy Christmas presents for their grandchildren, put ham on the table and fix the leaky roof.

"They will be able to enjoy the spirit of Christmas, they will be able to catch up on bills and expenses that they've not been able to meet to date."

"This is the opportunity for them to participate again in society and to have their standard of living improved."

Carers Australia CEO Joan Hughes said carers would use the payment for medical equipment, washing machines and accumulated debt. Carers Australia has vowed to continue to pressure the government to deliver pension reform before the next budget.

Ms White also hopes the government will lift pension rates by the middle of next year.

Although she welcomed the lump sum payment she said it was not a desirable approach for the long term.

"These sorts of payments should be in installments because there are so many people who won't benefit when it goes like it normally does into the pokies and such," she said.

Obesity threatens Aussie kids' life span

The life expectancy of Australian children will drop by two years if an obesity epidemic goes unchecked, the nation's preventative health taskforce has warned in its inaugural report. Turning the tide of obesity, slashing daily smoking rates to nine per cent or less and cutting risky drinking by almost a third by 2020 are some of the targets proposed by the National Preventative Health Taskforce in its discussion paper released on Friday.

Almost one third of the nation's illness is caused by lifestyle factors including smoking, obesity, risky drinking and poor diet, and the associated high blood pressure and cholesterol, according to the discussion paper. In only 15 years, from 1990 to 2005, the number of fat Australian adults jumped by a staggering 2.8 million.

Currently, almost one quarter of children are overweight or obese.

"Recent trends in Australian children predict that their life expectancy will fall two years by the time they are 20 years old, setting them back to the levels seen for males in 2001 and for females in 1997," the paper says. "This is not a legacy we should be leaving our children."

Children can suffer from type two diabetes but the disease is usually found in older people and is linked to obesity, low exercise and poor diet. It will become the leading disease for men and the second most common disease for women in 15 years if obesity rates continue to grow, costing the public purse \$7 billion by 2032.

The taskforce proposes to stem obesity by boosting access to healthier foods and ensuring healthy eating



and exercise are part of everyday life in schools, workplaces and communities.

It also suggests a crackdown on junk food marketing to children and an overhaul of town planning to encourage walking, cycling and sport.

Almost 2.9 million adults smoke every day.

The taskforce proposes to slash daily smoking rates to nine per cent or less through measures including raising the excise and customs duty on tobacco and further regulating the tobacco industry, such as banning point-of-sale promotion.

One in five Australians drink at a level that puts them at risk of short-term harm at least once a month.

The taskforce proposes cutting harmful drinking rates by 30 per cent by restricting opening hours and the discounting of alcohol products.

It suggests introducing restrictions on alcohol advertising and sponsorship of cultural and sporting events, as well as changing the tax regime to encourage consumption of low-alcohol products and lowering the legal blood alcohol concentration levels for drivers.

The cost of alcohol abuse, obesity and smoking combined is estimated to be almost \$6 billion a year, plus \$13 billion in lost productivity.

Federal Health Minister Nicola Roxon said that 25 years after the introduction of anti-smoking policies, smoking rates were at an historic low.

"But there is much more to be done," she said.

"The changes we need will require a concerted effort across the community - involving individuals, governments, industry, media and non-government organisations.

"This is an important debate with real consequences for Australia's future."

Taskforce chair, Professor Rob Moodie, said he looked forward to community consultations, to be held across the nation late this year and early next.

Submissions on the discussion paper can be made to the taskforce until January 2 next year.

The taskforce is scheduled to deliver its blueprint for preventative health reform to government by June 2009.

Youths rely on porn for sex education

Over half of Austrian male youths rely on pornography for information on sexuality, according to a study released by the Austrian Institute for Sexual Education in Vienna.

"I don't see it as a moral problem," said Wolfgang Kostenwein, one of the psychologists who worked on the study, which was conducted in 2007 among 13- to 21-year old male and female adolescents. "But youths have less and less feeling for real sexual longing," he said. "What is increasing is an artificial idea about what sex is." Among the females in the study of 1,037 youths, 10 per cent said they used pornography as a source for sexual knowledge.

Kostenwein said his experience as a sexual counsellor indicated teenagers were led to believe by pornography that they had to engage in certain sexual acts.

He said he was often asked by girls, "how should I do that, how long does it last, at what point is it finally over?"

Another problem was that pornography made youths insecure about their bodies, the psychologist said.

Besides pornography, a majority of young males gets information from conversations, personal experience and school. Females rely mostly on magazines, conversations and school, the study found. But talks with friends were also influenced by pornography, mostly seen on the internet or on video clips shared via mobile phones, Kostenwein said. One benefit of the prevalence of pornography is that it allows sex educators to use this topic as a gateway to talk with teenagers about contraception, Kostenwein and his colleagues have found.

With eleven births per 1,000 women between the age of 15 to 19, Austria has the highest teenage birth rate in Western Europe.