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Authors' response to Letter to the Editor: ANZJPH-2017-248

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Abstract

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Authors' response to Letter to the Editor: ANZJPH-2017-248

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The letter from Bright and colleagues highlights the importance of continuous and consistent national surveillance systems to monitor population physical activity. It is a major strength that the ABS has included a consistent set of questions for more than 20 years in the Australian National Health Survey, even though the conceptualisation of physical activity has evolved to encompass more than just fitness and exercise. It should be noted that the National Health Survey has expanded over the years with the inclusion of other supplementary measures of physical activity (e.g. walking, sedentary behaviour).¹

While physical activity surveillance at the state and territory levels have used the Active Australia survey for more than a decade, caution is needed when comparing Active Australia estimates with those observed using the original National Health Survey questions. As illustrated in a historical review of physical activity surveillance in Australia,² the prevalence of sufficiently active adults differed across states/territories and survey years from 2001 to 2013, and levels were overall higher than estimated by the National Health Survey. Reasons for this include: variations in the definition of "sufficiently active" (e.g. Active Australia has duration only, and duration and frequency criteria); and changes in sampling methods (e.g. NSW added mobile numbers to the sampling frame in 2012;³ variations in the Active Australia questions asked across jurisdictions),^{2,4} meaning that only the National Health Survey provides consistent trend information.

In our analyses, we ran separate models using the categorical variable "year of survey" (six surveys) and the continuous variable "year" (22 years). The continuous "year" variable was used for examining linear trends from

1989 to 2011. Hence, the interpretation that the models were miss-specified is incorrect. Finally, overall exercise levels – the more vigorous component of active health – has not increased over the past two decades, indicating clear lack of public health improvements in this parameter.

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