

## Media Release

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### Research reveals worldwide rise of attacks on 'nanny state'

The Public Health Association conference was told today that public health initiatives to protect populations from the risks of the tobacco, alcohol and food industries have increasingly been labelled as *nanny state*.

The lead presenter of research into how media articles framed public health initiatives, Dr George Thomson from the University of Otago, Wellington, told delegates in Dunedin the use of negative language (such as *political correctness*, or *bureaucracy*) stereotyped and undermined those initiatives.

"Internationally, the use of the term 'nanny state' has generally increased in the period 2003-2008, compared to 1998-2002. Of the three terms researched, *nanny state* has been the most used with health initiatives.

"Media articles in the United Kingdom and New Zealand had significantly higher rates of use of the three terms, compared to the rest of the world. The highest annual rate of use of *nanny state* in the UK was more than four times the highest rate for the world," Dr Thomson told the conference.

Worldwide, the terms have been most frequently used in association with tobacco control efforts. But in New Zealand the association of *nanny state* and *bureaucracy* with efforts to control obesity increased after 2003, peaking in election year 2008. The 2008 rate of use of *nanny state* with obesity is almost ten times the rate in 2003.

"The increased use of these terms appears to be driven by industries that are afraid of increased control over the marketing of unhealthy products.

"When industries think their profits are at risk, they negatively frame the efforts of government to protect people from an industry's activities. The big increases in the use of *nanny state* and *bureaucracy* in New Zealand came when smokefree bar laws were proposed and parliament's Obesity Inquiry was launched.

"There's a need to reframe public health activity as stewardship that protects people. Governments are expected to balance the public good against the interests of big business, and to care for the vulnerable in society. We need to create the language to reflect this, which looks behind slogans and the stereotyping of opposition to unhealthy products."

Dr Thomson said there's a need to reframe and analyse businesses that inflict health damage to people, as leeches on society.

"Governments that allow damage to the general public are creating the *nanny state*, and are following corporate welfare policies, rather than the public good," he said.

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