



ADA NSW Media Advisor **Stuart Turner** talks to Australian of the Year Dr James Muecke, who is using his platform to raise awareness of the harmful effects of sugar and its contribution to conditions including tooth decay, obesity and type 2 diabetes in Australia.

## How we've fallen into the sugar

# TRAP



### How has sugar become such a prevalent part of our diet and lifestyle?

There's no biological process in our bodies that demands we ingest sugar or carbs – it's a con. For two million years, humans evolved on a diverse diet of fresh seasonal foods and we didn't develop type 2 diabetes.

Prior to the 1600s sugar was an expensive commodity, but the boom in the sugar trade led to increasing availability and popularity of sugar. About 100 years ago, the first dietary guidelines were introduced and at the same time, we saw the introduction of sugary drinks, breakfast cereals and highly processed foods.

The Australian Dietary Guidelines have recommended we eat products made from white flour, white rice and white potatoes, which contain refined carbohydrates. These are all virtually pure starch, which is converted to glucose when it reaches the gut, so you are pretty much eating sugar. The guidelines are also flawed and biased because their creation has been conflicted by industry and ideology.

We've been encouraged to eat less fat and consume more carbs and yet we've never been fatter, our teeth never more rotten and type 2 diabetes and its complications never more prevalent. We now have a situation where over 10 per cent of the population has type 2 or pre-diabetes – 50% in some lower socio-economic areas – which is deeply concerning.

### You've talked about the 5As of sugar toxicity. What are they?

Addiction, accessibility, alleviation, advertising and addition. The latter means the amount of disguised and hidden sugar added to products and which many of us are unaware of.

Advertising and accessibility are straightforward. Sugar is everywhere. We are flooded with TV commercials and shops placing sugary items at checkout counters and using predatory marketing techniques to encourage us to consume more sugar.

I believe we need to make people more aware of the addictive nature of sugar and that we're using sugar to alleviate stress and make us feel better when we're down. We need the government to step in and take action.

### How can we address those five As?

If you're addicted to something, you need to be protected and have the environment that's fostering the addiction addressed. This could include steps such as removing chocolate and sweets from supermarket checkout areas, in easy reach and full view of customers.

We have a Health Star Rating System in Australia which is flawed – for example, promoting orange juice as 'healthy' when it is packed full of sugar. We need a clear, transparent and easily understandable system to warn people of the dangers of added sugar. For example, I'd like to see images on labels showing the amount of added sugar in teaspoons or sugar cubes. This would be an understandable way of communicating with the public. We have

those graphic images of the dangers of smoking on cigarette packets – this would be a similar if less demonstrable way of highlighting sugar content.

It was a long road to better health outcomes with smoking but after World War Two about 80 per cent of men smoked. Now it's around 14 per cent and smoking-related diseases and deaths have declined. We can have similar results with sugar consumption and type 2 diabetes.

### What about banning or limiting TV and other advertising of sugary items?

A ban on television advertising of highly sugared items before 9pm should be

considered to limit the exposure of children to these products. Business are preying on our children through their promotion of products with high sugar content. Sugar is the only addictive substance we give to our kids. You wouldn't give them alcohol or cigarettes – why are we giving them so much sugar? Removing advertising from buses, trams and government buildings should also be considered.

### What about a sugar tax?

We've seen countries such as Mexico have success with a sugar tax. A 20% tax on sugary drinks, used to fund health inequalities and an awareness campaign on the importance of good nutrition, would be a great step. Any tax shouldn't be limited to 'just' bottled drinks; rather, it should apply to energy and sports drinks and flavoured milks with a high sugar content.

I've met with the Australian Beverages Council. Their deal with the Government to reduce the amount of sugar in sugary drinks by 2025 isn't on track and involves broadening the portfolio rather than reducing the amount of sugar in the most highly consumed drinks. We need a mandated approach to tackling this issue. The Government needs to step in to protect the health of all Australians and protect the taxpayers who are funding the type 2 diabetes bill to the tune of \$20 billion every year.

### How can dentists help you achieve your goals of tackling over-consumption of sugar?

A simple step is to follow me on social media and share my messages. Discussing the issue at their conferences and sharing ideas with their fellow ADA state and federal members, GPs and other medical professionals are other effective ways to generate discussion of these vital issues.

I also think they need to use frank language with patients. We know tooth decay is a massive problem so showing confronting images of 'this is what your teeth will look like if you carry on eating sugar' is critical.

High sugar content extends across the whole processed food industry so we really need to raise public awareness. It's not about 'nannyism' – it's about giving people the facts on what they are consuming.

### How do you feel the COVID-19 pandemic will affect Australians' oral health and general well-being?

At the start of the outbreak people were bulk-buying things like soft drinks, and rice and pasta which are full of refined

carbohydrates. People who are feeling down may also be turning to sugary items, junk food and fast food for comfort as well. I've no doubt that we'll see an increase in conditions such as tooth decay and type 2 diabetes due to the pandemic. We'll need to work even harder to make people conscious of the importance not only of healthy eating but also exercise and the benefits of good mental health and resilience.

### You've had an incredible life personally and professionally (see panel right). Many of our members are leaders of practice teams. What have your experiences taught you about good leadership?

One of the critical things is leading by example. You need to learn from your mistakes and be a problem solver and risk taker. Good communication skills are important – take that public speaking course if it helps you!

It's vital to embrace every opportunity in life, even if it doesn't immediately seem like something you want to do. Maintain your health and surround yourself with good friends and positive people.

Healthcare is one of the most rewarding professions to be involved in. I'd say to any dentist, 'give back' – take the opportunity to engage with any humanitarian pursuits you can.

### How rewarding was it to be named as Australian of the Year?

It was incredibly special. Of course, with the pandemic it has been challenging. I was looking forward to travelling around Australia this year for speaking engagements, however from March onwards the diary was empty. I've had to be resourceful and use social media and other online platforms to reach people and get the word out. For myself, it's been a great chance to raise awareness of [my charity] Sight For All and a great platform to discuss issues I am highly passionate about.

### What's some of the best pieces of advice you have received in your life?

Broaden your horizons, embrace the challenges and give back. You never know when the things you do will lead to extraordinary opportunities and life-changing moments.

For dentists, don't just narrow your field to dentistry. Explore other hobbies as you never know when you will draw on such experiences to help you in life. And always try to keep a positive approach in everything you do.



Dr James Muecke, pictured here receiving his 2020 Australian of the Year title, is on a crusade to highlight the dangers of sugar. Credit: NADC/Salty Dingo.

### WHO IS DR JAMES MUECKE?

Dr James Muecke is an SA-based ophthalmologist and the 2020 Australian of the Year.

Starting his career in Kenya, he became an eye surgeon and blindness prevention campaigner. While in Africa he escaped from armed rebel soldiers in Uganda and survived several armed robberies at his Kenyan hospital.

He has spent the last three decades working to prevent and treat blindness in some of the world's poorest countries.

Dr Muecke is founder and Chairman of Sight For All ([www.sightforall.org](http://www.sightforall.org)), a charity delivering speciality eye health training and equipment to low income countries. Working as a clinician and through Sight For All, Dr Muecke has seen the devastating effects of type 2 diabetes on eyesight.

He was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in the 2012 Queen's Birthday Honours.

Away from healthcare, Dr Muecke has trekked some of the world's highest mountains and also released two albums of electronic music. His wife Mena (OAM) also works with Sight For All and he has two children.