

CORRECTED TRANSCRIPT

RURAL AND REGIONAL SERVICES AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Country Football

Melbourne – 10 May 2004

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Dr Robert Moodie, CEO VicHealth (sworn).

The CHAIR – Welcome, Dr Moodie.

Under the powers conferred on this committee by the Constitution Act and the Parliamentary Committees Act, this committee is empowered to take all evidence of these hearings on oath or affirmation. I wish to advise all present at these hearings that all evidence taken by this committee, including submissions, is, under the provisions of the Constitution Act and granted immunity from judicial review. I also wish to advise witnesses that any comments made by witnesses outside the committee's hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. We are an all-party parliamentary committee, including one Independent, hearing evidence into the inquiry into country football. You may like to begin with an opening statement, and the committee can then ask you questions.

Dr MOODIE – Firstly, over the tobacco sponsorship and promoting a message to actually using our resources to work with football and all the other sports, and in terms of where we couldn't necessarily compete with the money we had and the whole notion of sponsorship, we found that was less effective. But in one sense, we can use the same amount of money and we can use it in a different way. Where with football in Victoria and with country football we're fundamentally interested in increasing levels of participation in all sports, but obviously in this case in football, and for two purposes: mainly as you've been hearing now about the physical activity benefits from competing and being involved in sport regularly, but also from the emotional and mental health benefits to kids and adults who are involved, who have a valued social role, who are involved in a sense to improve, they tend to do much better than those who are isolated. So in the long run we're really seeing community sport – whether that's community football or community netball or whatever – as major community assets. And sometimes people don't appreciate how important it is until you take it away. I would ask any of you when you see a decline or demise of a particular institution – being football, netball or whatever – to look at how much that impacts on people's lives. And I guess Tom Hafey's is the best story I've heard – of two neighbours in the bush who, once the football club declined, never saw each other. There was no forum for them to actually get together and in a sense bond or share with each other.

Another important point on what we're promoting and why we're working so hard with football in Victoria – and I really want to compliment Football Victoria on the work that they are doing in working with us – is to say that it's about good sport. We've heard much in the past few weeks about the bad aspects of sports. We're very much about promoting the positive in sport. It's about promoting a family friendly environment within a club, rather than the boys-only booze bar picture in the long run; bad sport doesn't necessarily lead to good health, and that's in a sense why we've been supporting Australian Drug Foundation's Good Sports Program in the last five years, which has been about helping to accredit clubs using the [indistinct] and assessing the ones that do really well and that are actually changing the culture. Some of the best ones have moved from sort of two senior teams to five senior teams and five junior teams, where there are veterans there, where they've changed the culture of their club to welcome the whole of the community. The classic for this is in Gippsland, where they had something like 90% of the town involved in the football club. But they've been very successful in getting people in.

We're very interested in challenging our sporting associations in that Victorians have been terribly good at elite sport; we've been very good at that. But we want to challenge ourselves to be as good at participative sport as we are at elite sport and that actually means a lot of new thinking. It means: Well, how do you get to people you don't normally get to? How do you get to populations that can't get to you? How do you overcome transport problems? How do you overcome cost barriers? How do you change maybe the way you do your normal sports business to get to new populations? Again Football Victoria now has a community football unit and is starting to look at some of these things that are very far away. A. How do you welcome football in terms of a culture? How do you actually do that? How do you get to indigenous kids? How do you get to new populations that have never been exposed to the game and to people who have never heard of Australian Rules football? How do you get to them, and how do you include them? How do you include the parents? And then there is the stage of looking at new forms of recreational football. If you play soccer, you can have a scratch match of soccer with a ball, and that's all you need. Same with rugby; there's never actually been one, apart from kick to kick in Australian Rules football. How do you get a new form of a footy that actually enables people to have scratch matches? So we're also looking at how do you get people to participate – it might not necessarily be that they train on Tuesdays and Thursdays and play on Saturday. There may be other ways of getting to kids. I am sure Football Victoria will tell you about that challenge, of how you get 15, 16, 17, 18-year-olds involved in sport.

We're particularly keen on working with sporting clubs and sporting associations. We have worked with the state football associations, but we are now also working with regional sports assemblies and community sports associations for the first time, and we have started to fund them, promoting their role as a community asset. As I mentioned before, these bodies are vitally important to the overall health of the community in the way that they

bring people together. There's also some really good data coming – initiated in the United States – looking at Year 9 kids, the kids who are involved in regular team sports and those who are involved in after-school activities. And it's protective at a really high level for virtually all the factors – the use of tobacco, binge drinking, marijuana, self-harm or harming anybody else. It's about self-esteem issues. At the end of the day, it's even about how do you do your homework, but it is interesting to see how, I guess, to get a bit of evidence back about good sport, good physical activity, is important, and the physical involvement of kids, probably at an emotional involvement as well. In a sense of the net cost–

We also see some of the integration issues, of where football clubs have been working with netball clubs, and that has been a positive move. It's obviously easier for families to all be heading off to one other town to play away, rather than the sons going in one direction and the daughters going in the other. I guess there is a lot of room for clubs, for different sports, to actually work more to get together in terms of making sure their resources are shared or grouped so that they can support each other. Obviously from our point of view, we're not supporting football over cricket or anything else. From our point of view, it's actually how do you increase participation in the sense that the enemy is not other sport, it's television as an alternative form of entertainment. It's a sense of where we want to get the new market from, where we think the school has an active interest in being involved. We've also been concerned about the timing around physical activity and participation rates. The rise in overweight and obesity levels is obviously a major reason we've changed our whole investment patterns. So sponsorships are actively involved in increasing the numbers of people playing sport and that's quite an issue now; they are quite different than 20-30 years ago in terms of availability. Time is also an issue; it's not so available as it was 20-30 years ago. It's very much harder for people generally to exercise now than it was 20 or 30 years ago.

Some of the disincentives might be of interest to the committee: obviously the issue of insurance premiums has been a major problem across the board. Whether you're talking about kids playing at school or outside. The Ballarat Basketball Club's premium has gone from \$6,000 to \$46,000 a year. Goroke had a \$2,500 grant for a Freeza project. It cost them \$3,000 to cover the project. That is fundamentally absurd when we have such a huge problem with this – and whether it's about street parties or whatever. Emotionally people are not being able to associate by virtue of the public liability insurance. This is madness, and in the long run it leads to isolation. If you don't get people together you get depressed communities. That's why we absolutely hate it.

I think the local government charges have obviously increased to user pays, which has been a real problem for many clubs. That's a lot of the stuff that we get back from the people I work with. You may know more about it than we do, but the cost of seeking professionalism, the notion of clubs having to raise a lot of money for a few players, really does affect some clubs' viability. That seems to be happening in most sports that have moved that way.

One of the issues of concern about the impact of a change in demographics on clubs, and clubs fighting for their survival is managing transition; I mean they're tough to do, but in a sense there needs to be a marker on all the smaller clubs that are, in the next five or ten years, potentially going to go under. Then there has to be a transition plan to the business. I guess how do you do it? How do you manage downsizing? Well, this is the sort of downsizing that's happening against our will; but on the other hand, if you can't manage people into their next player engaging in something [indistinct] because then they lose all their opportunity – and if they don't act they may miss an opportunity or become socially disconnected at the same time.

So some of the recommendations that we very much support – as Andrew mentioned before when he talked about the peak football organisations considering utilising other community groups, whether that's football, cricket or tennis – whatever. In a sense, they can actually use each other's resources, if that's a way of doing business – particularly, obviously, during different times during the year. We've been in partnership with the Australian Sports Commission, promoting and developing a program called Out of School Hours, which is really about getting to kids who are in care after school – as most of them are sitting literally on their bums watching videos. We've now got 18 sports involved with local schools and the people who are involved in the local Auskick to come down to the schools and become involved in helping those kids to do sport after school. I suppose it doesn't really matter what the sport is, but just making it available to kids after school is the issue, and it's also a way of using the good will that's available in the community and tapping that into schools.

I guess the other way to recognise volunteers and their contributions is to look at tax concessions, or whatever, for the work that people do in volunteering support in our community, to acknowledge the tremendous role people play in volunteering for their clubs or for whatever.

We want to continue to support the work Football Victoria is doing in leading the way in how do we get new populations to play our game – how do we become inventive, innovative, ingenious, in terms of looking at new methods of getting participation? Whether it's getting kids from North Geelong down to the Ocean Grove Surf Club – you know, kids have come out from Croatia or Yugoslavia and have never seen a beach before and are now in patrols. They had to change the word 'patrol' because coming out of Croatia that's just a cruel word.

Football Victoria is 10 points ahead in their way they're doing business. We're a very strong supporter of that; and we think they should be supported by us as well as by the government and by the AFL. It has the enormous potential to maintain participation levels.

The CHAIR – Rob, you've talked about some of the clubs that are good examples of the Good Sports Program and their success. Have you got any scenarios written down that you could get to us?

Dr MOODIE – Sure. Has the ADF Good Sports Program not sent anything to you?

The CHAIR – We've got that.

Dr MOODIE – I suggested they come to you with a number of good examples. I know a lot of clubs have fundamentally changed the way they do business. There are a lot of concerns about – “Well we have a bar and we need the bar, the takings of the bar, to actually survive.” And how do we manage that? Well, it can be managed well so that in a sense the more people you get buying low alcohol beer the better you are as against the people who are selling less alcohol.

The CHAIR – Thank you very much.

Dr NAPHTHINE – Can I ask Rob: you've listed Football Victoria's 10 key VicHealth-funded projects. Could you give an indication of what is the total dollar amount that VicHealth would put into football-related activities?

Dr MOODIE – Well with the agreement we have with Football Victoria it's \$670 000 per year as a three-year agreement. We've moved to a longer agreement. We used to have one-year agreements. Everyone will agree a three-year agreement is much better. And we've done a lot and a lot of work over the past two years. We think now we're better aligned and have a better arrangement.

Dr NAPHTHINE – And what's the total budget of VicHealth?

Dr MOODIE – \$27.5 million this year.

Dr NAPHTHINE – I suppose the obvious question is: do you think \$670 000 per year out of a total budget of \$28 million for the highest participator sport and the very strong role it plays in country communities and building communities – do you suppose that perhaps there's a capacity for more effective outcomes through increasing funding through VicHealth sponsorship of a range of football programs?

Dr MOODIE – Sure. We fund football at a higher rate than any other sport, so in a sense it's a special category. We have moved the funds from elite sport. We're also getting lots of funding for other sports programs as well, and that's going to most of the, well – sport to football as well. Obviously we've got huge pressures on our funding already, but as I say it's well above the market.

Mr MITCHELL – Rob, what's VicHealth doing to address some of the negative aspects of sport, such as violence, parental pressures and crowds of gangs and that type of thing?

Dr MOODIE – Sure. What we've now been doing over many years has been working on clubs and club environments. That's originally around the issue of the smoke-free environments, managing alcohol safely, nutrition, even Sun Smart. We are also working on welcoming and inclusive environments. That's been the number one thing we're wanting to work on for all state sporting associations. Again, I think that in spite of some of the media and press, there's an enormous amount of good work being done in football and a lot of work on working with managers, working with coaches, on the issues around anger management for kids. Things like this are terrific.

The AFL and the VFL in Victoria have an enormous amount to do in respect to umpiring. I come from a different sporting background, and it's interesting coming from a rugby background where players do not backchat the

umpire. I have just been in discussions with the Football Umpires and Players Association about changing the culture around this behaviour, and I think it's a really good issue.

Mr MITCHELL – It's interesting that there is a comment like – say, the umpires – if an umpire makes a mistake, there's a fair bit of abuse hurled at him over the fence, but if a player does a similar-size mistake, it's more or less not okay.

Dr NAPHTHINE – I think I'd barrack for the ball.

Mr INGRAM – Rob, there's been a bit of discussion – and the AFL raised the issue – about obesity in children and how particularly our young people are becoming less and less fit, and that they lack healthy lifestyles. Obviously we've got to do a lot more, and I don't necessarily know that we are getting that message to children – or from the children back into the families at a level suitable to reduce the cost on society into the future. How much more do we need to do – your organisation now, we as politicians and governments, to really get that message through and try and change society's lack of action on it?

Dr MOODIE – The answer is an enormous amount. I think what might be appreciated generally in communities over the last three years is how much things have changed. People's opportunity to exercise has become harder. People don't chop their wood. They do little manual labour around the house – this is compared to 30 years ago. You can't buy a car now where you can wind a window down. Everything is virtually automated. People get leaf-blowers – again, you don't rake the leaves because you can just blow them away. Try and find buildings now where you can get to the stairs. In many ways exercise has been designed out of our lives.

Little kids walking to school now – 30 years ago 70% of kids walked to school. We're doing one thing, which you may know of, called the Walking School Bus, which is getting kids to walk part of the way along their track to school with a parent up front, and a parent up the back, and the bus picks up kids along the way, and then they all do the same thing on the way back. Now that's overcoming parents' fear of abduction. In Australia today it's about overcoming fear – you might be hit by a car, which is interesting, because, well they might be at greater risk because a whole lot of people drive their kids to school. And it also allows the kids to engage with each other on the way to school. They're more alert when they get to school; they've had physical activity. Boys who do this tend to have more exercise when they get home as well. But it also means there's fewer cars around schools, less emissions. And we've even got to the stage of quite good locally adapted models developed in rural areas where kids live a long way from school; they're dropped about a kilometre away from the school and they join the school bus and they walk.

So it's the notion of almost switching, recalibrating our way of doing business and the costs of introducing exercise back into kids lives. You're going to have a generation of people who have lost their legs and would've forgotten how to walk to school. The notion of the out-of-school-hours activity again – that's a way of getting kids to think that participating in sports is normal and it's not abnormal.

Nutritional messages: I think we have a huge issue around nutritional advertising and we have a real issue around using cars. Particularly in Melbourne, promoting active forms of transport is a huge issue – the wrong answer sorry!

Mr INGRAM – I know this is going to be very hard, but can you estimate a cost if we don't?

Dr MOODIE – Oh it's millions. Just look at the rise in Type 2 diabetes. Obviously they're major estimations, major global figures, but from a physical health point of view, without a doubt that's a major challenge for the next 30-40 years in Australia. I think Andrew mentioned Australia has the fourth highest rate of obesity out of all the OECD countries. And we're increasing the fastest. So it's that rate of increase that is really quite shocking, and it's sort of happening – it's only in the last two, three years that it's really started to affect the community and concern has risen. It will entail quite dramatic shifts in how we actually get from place to place.

So many of our short trips are taken by car. If you look at urban design in the outer areas and if you design cul de sacs into every development, people are near a shop – as the crow flies – a kilometre away. But if you want to actually walk there, it might be 3km to actually get there. So we're working very hard with the Planning Institute of Australia to try to get them to pick up the issue of planning good health in the local environment.

Mr INGRAM – Is one of those plans making sure there is open space for kids to run and kick a footy?

Dr MOODIE – Absolutely. Takefootpaths. If you have a footpath outside your place, then you're 60% less likely to be obese than if you don't have a functioning footpath. If you live on a freeway, you're four times more likely to be obese than if you don't live on a freeway. The number of cars that actually go in front of your house can not only determine how fit you are, but also determines how well you know your friends down the street. One of the good things about the Walking School Bus is getting the kids back on the streets, where people are actively using their local pavements. And that's good from a safety point of view. Another reason for having – and I think you mentioned it before – for having active sporting clubs is crime prevention. I quote Les Twentymen: the Maribyrnong Magistrates Court, of the 600 kids through there, only two or three kids were involved in active sport.

Dr NAPHTHINE – Rob, one of the challenges that we have is to get the balance right between things that we do to protect society and things that then become inhibitors for activity. For example, there's a lot of pressure – say, like in the scouting movement – everyone has to have a police check. I am not sure if it happens in Auskick now, but I'm sure it will happen in Auskick – that everybody who participates in Auskick as a volunteer will have to have a police check. Therefore, that means half – a number of people – just don't want to go through that process, let alone the cost of that process. And even at the footy ground, you need to have a responsible serving of alcohol certificate, which is fair and reasonable, responsible food handling – also fair and reasonable. But all of those things combined make it less likely for people to want to participate. It gets overwhelming, and therefore then you haven't got the infrastructure to provide the support for your children. And if you're a parent, you sort of say, "Look, it's too hard". It's easier to let the child play in front of the television or play the X-Box, rather than getting him or her to the local sporting club. Now, how do we get that balance right between when we get individual things before us as Members of Parliament saying, "Yes, that sounds like a good thing to protect children, but we might be cutting off our nose to spite our face", because you might be actually denying access by closing down services and organisations.

Dr MOODIE – That's a really really good point. Last week in the news there was discussion over a school closing off play before school. You may know about that. That's a classic example of where over-regulation is actually becoming a problem, and I think you getting the balance right is absolutely crucial. In terms of when we are introducing the new regulation, we have to look at the downside of it: Will we wrap our kids in cotton wool forever so they never get exposed to any risks and therefore won't be active? I think optimal regulation definitely has its place, but over-regulation doesn't have its place. I think we've heard the same thing about the Walking School Bus. We have to have all the volunteers police checked. And we've actually done that through the local councils, and that seems to have worked very well. They now have systems in place, so I think we do have to adapt to a changing world, there's no doubt about that. It's how we cleverly get the balance right for regulation and then cleverly adapt to what the new environment are.

I don't think we very cleverly adapted to the new environments with respect to activity and exercise at school – like it's happened and we haven't seen it. But I think if you can – the consensus before you is saying, "Okay you've had environmental impacts assessment" and you say, "Well actually we're trying to bring about positive assessments. What is this regulation going to do to our activities?" It's a bit like a lot of the safety regulations – and even the food safety regulations. How many sausage sizzles have been stopped by virtue of an overzealous food regulation?

The CHAIR – Any further questions? Thanks very much for your submission, Rob. I think you really hit the nail on the head, especially with communities and the importance of the sports to them. Again, many thanks.

Witness withdrew.