Celebrating 20 Years of the **Students As LifeStyle Activists** Program

Professor Smita Shah OAM, Catriona Lockett, Kym Rizzo Liu, Dr Kean-Seng Lim and Christine Cawsey AM

2024 marks the 20th anniversary of the award-winning Students as LifeStyle Activists (SALSA) program, a pioneering initiative in Western Sydney.

The program's success underscores its effective approach to fostering healthier communities through collaborations with schools, healthcare providers and universities.

The SALSA program was launched in 2004 by the Mt Druitt Medical Practitioners Association (MDMPA) in response to escalating childhood obesity rates in western Sydney. Recognising the challenge of reaching adolescents who seldom visited GP practices, the MDMPA, along with Rooty Hill High School and the Prevention Education and Research Unit (PERU), developed a school-based preventative intervention. This program, based on Social Cognitive Theory and Empowerment Education, involves Year 10 students teaching Year 8

Partnership between local GPs, AMA (NSW) and SALSA, Rooty Hill High School 2016

students about healthy lifestyles, thereby positioning them as role models and motivators.

"Challenged by the confronting statistics about adult obesity and poor diet in Australia, initiatives that work to change the attitudes, eating behaviours, and exercise habits of secondary students are rare.

SALSA is one such initiative," said Dr Kean-Seng Lim, President of MDMPA.

In 2014, SALSA was honoured with multiple awards, including the Community Choice Award and the Partnership Award from the Western Sydney Local Health District. To maintain its relevance and effectiveness, the program has evolved, incorporating university students as SALSA educators who train Year 10 peer leaders. The introduction of SALSA Youth Voices (SYV) in 2017 further extended the program's impact. SYV empowers Year 10 leaders to create and implement 'School Action Plans,' leading to initiatives such as redesigned sports uniforms and water refill stations (2). SALSA's effectiveness has been validated through extensive evaluations supported by the Federal Health Department.

Erskine Park High School SALSA Peer Leaders, Westmead Hospital 2019

The program has positively influenced dietary and physical activity behaviours in Year 10 and Year 8 students across 23 high schools. It is also recognized for its cost-effectiveness, with an expense of less than $10 per student (3,4).

Since its inception, SALSA has trained over 550 university students and engaged more than 26,000 high school students from over 40 schools. The program's success has led to international trials in the Middle East, China, and Vietnam, and it has been recognized by UNICEF as a model for adolescent and youth programs in the Middle East and Africa (5,6,7).

The SALSA program focuses on the richest resource of our community - students themselves. It has proven to be a sustainable and impactful initiative in promoting improving diet and increasing physical activity in high school students. We would like to thank the students and staff from the SALSA schools for their participation and support. We also acknowledge the financial support we receive from Went West, Western Sydney Primary Health Network and from Daniel McAlary.

Prevention Education and Research Unit (PERU) receiving the Quality Award in 2014

Oxley and Gunnedah SALSA Peer Leaders and University Educators; 2023

"**Challenged by the confronting statistics about adult obesity and poor diet in Australia, initiatives that work to change the attitudes, eating behaviours, and exercise habits of secondary students are rare. SALSA is one such initiative,**" Dr Kean-Seng Lim, President of MDMPA.

Scan the QR code to read the references.

Doctors-in-Training *Committee*

AMA (NSW) Doctors-in-Training Committee (DITC) meets regularly to discuss issues affecting DITs in NSW. The DITC is an important voice for all DITs, and meetings are open to all members.

If you are interested in advocacy, please consider joining by emailing *dit@amansw.com.au*

Dr Jacqueline Ho
ENT Registrar,
AMA (NSW) DITC Co-Chair