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Media Release

Health experts highlight need for action to address rise of chronic disease

Links between human and environmental health now clearer than ever before

Melbourne, 21 September 2021 – Leading life and health insurer AIA Australia recently hosted a virtual roundtable to discuss the concerning state of health and wellbeing in Australia. During the forum, all 16 health experts present unequivocally concluded that a strategy for sustainable change is needed across governments, not-for-profit organisations, the private sector and individuals.

The rise of chronic disease

The roundtable discussed the rising incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Australia as well as globally, and the common modifiable behaviours driving this trend. While COVID-19, a communicable disease, has taken centre stage in the public health consciousness, the underlying threat of NCDs has not only persisted, but continues to increase and has significantly impacted vulnerability to the virus.

In attendance at the roundtable was the AFL's Head of Mental Health and Wellbeing, Dr Kate Hall, who highlighted the worrying effects of COVID-19 on mental health: *"The shadow pandemic has been mental ill-health and psychological distress, and not just with young people but across the adult population as well. I do believe we are still yet to see the full impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of Australians."*

As part of the roundtable discussion, AIA Australia presented its new health insight, **5590+**, which acknowledges the **five** individually modifiable behavioural factors – *physical inactivity, poor nutrition, smoking, excess alcohol and our interaction with the environment* – that lead to **five** major non-communicable diseases (NCDs) – *cancer, diabetes, respiratory disease, cardiovascular diseases, and mental health conditions and disorders* – which are responsible for **over 90 per cent** of deaths in Australia.

The need for an aligned strategy

The CEO and Managing Director of AIA Australia and New Zealand, Damien Mu said that 5590+ is a critical framework to drive significant and impactful dialogue on the power of prevention and health promotion and to encourage collaboration between sectors, from the top down.

"As a life and health insurer, we are in a unique position to work with experts across the wellbeing landscape on transforming the evidence of 5590+ into an actionable plan centred around health promotion, prevention and early intervention. This begins with health awareness and implementing the right products, services and partners to support, maintain and advance individual and community health," said Mr Mu.

Those in attendance agreed that there is a vital need for further public health education, awareness and resources, with multi-sectoral collaboration across the wellbeing landscape. While traditionally the diagnosis and treatment stages have been the predominant focus areas for improving health outcomes, the consensus among the panel of experts was that there is a need to work together to ensure prevention and early intervention measures are prioritised.

Senior Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne's Transport, Health and Urban Design Research Hub, Dr Jason Thompson believes that behavioural change is the toughest change of all, which is why a national policy approach could educate and incentivise communities. *"Trying to ask anyone to change their habits or behaviours in the absence of a supportive environment or in the absence of that environment changing is difficult,"* said Dr Thompson.

Health and the environment

There is a growing global focus, mirrored by a strong consensus among the experts present, on the importance of the interplay between health and wellbeing and environmental factors such as air pollution,

climate change, agriculture and food, and in particular how an individual's interactions with their environment can have a positive impact on both.

In discussing the links between the environment and health and wellbeing, British-Australian environmentalist Tim Jarvis AM said *"at an individual level, every one of us can improve our impact on the environment, which in turn improves the impact of the environment on our physical and mental health. For example, conserving natural resources, being mindful of our consumption and dietary choices, reducing household waste, and choosing to use public or active transport (such as walking and cycling) when possible, can improve mental wellbeing."*

AIA Australia's Head of Wellbeing Candice Smith highlighted the correlation between behaviours that have a positive impact on an individual's health and those that prevent harm to the environment.

"The important message to highlight and communicate is the strong correlation between the behaviours that have been shown to prevent disease and improve human wellbeing and those that have a positive impact on the planet. In many ways making healthy choices like using public transport, walking or cycling or choosing not to smoke and to eat a diet high in plant foods has now been shown to have an amplified impact on your health through the well-understood direct positive health benefits of those choices as well as by reducing the potential negative impacts that an unhealthy environment can have on your health," said Ms Smith.

The alignment of health and environmental policies and programs can offer win-win opportunities for the health of the community, as well as the planet, through the development of strategies that benefit both, such as pollution control, healthy urban design, and sustainable transport.

AIA Australia intends to make this a key focus of its research work, government advocacy and wellbeing strategy, to assist Australians to better understand the links between human health and the health of the planet, and to encourage behaviours that will have a positive impact for generations.

Focus on mental health

One in five Australians are impacted by mental health conditions, the most prevalent being depression, anxiety and substance use disorders. Mental health challenges have significant personal, social and economic impacts, as they are often associated with poor physical health, isolation, unemployment, poverty, stigmatisation, and homelessness.

All experts at the roundtable agreed that government policies can support mental wellbeing by concentrating on mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention. In addition, there needs to be a shift of resources towards targeting the risk factors for mental health conditions and disorders at both the individual and population levels.

"Moving forward, prevention for mental health has to be discussed alongside stigma. Help-seeking is still incredibly low; the lag time between the onset of symptoms and accessing any help is years and years. Stigma permeates all manner of efforts in the mental health space including efforts around our systems of care," Dr Hall said.

Improving behaviours

The roundtable participants discussed in detail the challenges in improving the five modifiable behavioural factors that contribute to disease – that is, physical inactivity, poor nutrition, smoking, excess alcohol and our interaction with the environment.

It became clear that the strategies and interventions that were likely to have a positive impact on each of the five behaviours were consistent.

Australia has not had a national nutrition policy since 1992, which challenges the implementation of proactive education and improvement. Professor Sarah McNaughton, Deputy Director at Deakin University's Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, said: *"It does make it hard to address individual behavioural change if we do not have an environment that supports healthy eating. It would be obvious to everybody that our food supply doesn't currently support healthy eating behaviours, nor does it support holistic health and wellbeing."*

When discussing alcohol and smoking, the Alcohol and Drug Foundation's New Strategic Programs Manager, Eleanor Costello, stressed that there needs to be a national focus on alcohol and its influence on mental health, suicide and domestic abuse so that swift policies are implemented to promote safer and healthier

outcomes for Australians. *“All participants have a role to play; the government, NGOs, private sector and individuals need to come together to influence change. This has been partially successful in Australia thanks to getting GPs on board with prevention, public policy and tax measures, but the environment plays a huge role in influencing alcohol and tobacco consumption. Working more collectively is required to create a positive shift,”* said Ms Costello.

AIA Australia’s role

As a life, health and wellbeing insurer, AIA Australia has invested heavily in developing programs that support Australians to maintain and improve their health. To help people be healthier for longer and improve their overall wellbeing, the insurer has built an ecosystem of products, services and partners across five stages: *Predict, Prevent, Diagnose, Treat and Recover*. Its world-leading science-based health and wellbeing program AIA Vitality incentivises and rewards members for being healthy is now used by 130,000 Australians.

AIA Australia now intends to embed the 5590+ insights into its work across the spectrum of *Predict-Prevent-Diagnose-Treat-Recover*, by focusing on influencing the five key modifiable behavioural factors. The insurer will also advocate to governments on the need for a multi-sectoral approach towards significant and sustainable improvement of the health and wellbeing outcomes of Australians.

“The case for investing in health promotion and prevention of NCDs is now stronger than ever. AIA Australia’s 5590+ insight shows us that by focusing on and improving five behaviours, we can help prevent chronic diseases. Right now, it’s important that we’re embedding the 5590+ health insight into Australia’s health strategies – to empower future governments, NGOs, the private sector, and individuals to lead healthier, longer, better lives,” said Mr Mu.

END

Editors’ notes –

Participants involved in this discussion:

- Peter Yates AM, Moderator and Chair, AIA Australia
- Damien Mu, CEO and Managing Director, AIA Australia
- Candice Smith, Head of Wellbeing, AIA Australia
- Dr Raghav Murali-Ganesh, Co-Founder and CEO, CancerAid
- Prof Tom Marwick, Director and CEO, cardiologist, Baker Institute
- Prof Jonathan Shaw, Deputy Director, endocrinologist, Baker Institute
- Dr Kate Hall, Head of Mental Health and Wellbeing, AFL
- Eleanor Costello, Manager, New Strategic Programs, Alcohol and Drug Foundation
- Professor David Dunstan, Head, Physical Activity, Baker Institute
- Professor Anna Timperio, Deputy Director, Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, Deakin University
- Professor Sarah McNaughton, Deputy Director, Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, Deakin University
- Tim Jarvis AM, AIA Vitality Ambassador and environmental explorer
- Dr Jason Thompson, Senior Research Fellow, Transport, Health and Urban Design Research Hub, University of Melbourne
- Dr Jaime Lee, AIA Vitality Ambassador and founder of Health Quotient
- Dr Gary Deed, GP & Chair, RACGP Specific Interests Diabetes
- Heidi Roache, GM Partnerships, Baker Institute

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About AIA Australia

AIA Australia is a leading life insurance specialist with over 48 years’ experience and a commitment to help Australians live healthier, longer, better lives. In 2014 the company launched AIA Vitality, a world leading, science-based health and wellbeing program, to the Australian market. In July 2017, AIA and its partners launched AIA’s health insurance business, now known as AIA Health Insurance.

In 2021, CommInsure Life was integrated into AIA Australia. The lives of more than 3.8 million Australians are protected and enhanced through AIA Australia’s unique value proposition of life, health and wellbeing. Our vision is to embrace shared value in championing Australia and New Zealand to be the healthiest and best protected nations in the world.

AIA Australia has been recognised with multiple awards, including the Women in Finance Employer of the Year Award (2018, 2019), Super Review's Best Insurer of the Year (2018, 2019), iSelect Partner Awards Insurer of the Year (2019), Insurance Asia International Life Insurer of the Year (Australia, 2020), Shared Value Awards Corporate Organisation Leading Through Shared Value (2019) and Shared Value Awards Organisation of the Year (2020).

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