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War on diabetes is personal

Sun Herald, Sydney

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AUSTRALIA'S HEALTH REVOLUTION WITH DR MICHAEL MOSLEY

New series

Wednesday, 7.30pm, SBS

For Michael Mosley, it's personal. After his father died prematurely thanks to type 2 diabetes, Mosley was determined it wouldn't happen to him and – continuing his long-established habit of experimenting on his own body – managed to reverse his own diabetes using nothing but diet.

He's also aware that type 2 diabetes is a massive global problem, and in Australia is responsible for more than 15,000 deaths every year. So when SBS asked if there was something he might like to make a documentary about here, the answer was obvious. "I said look, I'm really keen to get the message out there that type 2 diabetes is reversible," Mosley says. "And they said great, let's do it."

The production company thought it might be nice to involve some local expertise. Enter Ray Kelly, Gomeroid man and exercise physiologist who's spent a decade working with communities to reverse type 2 diabetes – and just happened to be midway through a PhD on the subject. The original idea was that he'd appear as an "expert". "But after a few Zoom meetings about what I do, the results I've been getting, the research I'm involved in, they ended up asking me if I'd be interested in co-hosting," Kelly says. "It's the old story of right place, right time – but ready to go. And it meant so much to me that we told the stories right."

He and Mosley weren't involved in selecting the participants but they did have input. They didn't want people who were too ill, "but I asked the production company to get some complex cases in there," Kelly says. "It was too good an opportunity to show what can be done."

And Mosley was delighted with the casting. "Although we are very different people – I think they must have cast him [Kelly] at least in part because we are very different people, the posh Englishman and the big tattooed Aussie bloke – we did develop something of a bromance as time went by," he says.

And as an Indigenous man, Kelly was able

to provide Mosley with entrée into communities he wouldn't normally be exposed

to. "Going to parts of Australia I hadn't visited before and meeting populations I hadn't encountered before was absolutely fascinating and I met such lovely people," Mosley says. "But it was very much outside my normal experiences."

For reasons that aren't entirely clear, type 2 diabetes seems to affect non-Caucasian populations particularly severely. But as these two gentlemen point out, the extent of the problem in Indigenous and lower socio-economic populations is much less mysterious, and has an awful lot to do with access to affordable, healthy food.

Working with the communities around Mount Druitt, Kelly found fresh fruit and vegetables at the nearest shopping centre was as expensive as the fresh produce in Bourke. "And there is absolutely no reason for that," he says. "But this is what we find: food deserts. But the poor quality foods are so accessible, and so inexpensive."

While there is always an element of personal responsibility, and personal agency, part of the mission is to tackle systemic change. "There's a whole host of things that you can do," Mosley says. "Advertising. Subsidies. A sugar tax. I see it as a bit like smoking. The war on people smoking was not won by telling people to stop smoking. It was won by taxation, by making it much harder to smoke, by banning smoking in pubs and clubs. I absolutely believe there are lots of things governments could and should be doing. That's why putting pressure on politicians is so important."

In the meantime, both men are doing what they can with what they have. "I think the thing I love about it is it's quite simple messaging," Mosley says. "Change what you're eating. Lose the weight. And you may well be able to come off medication and reverse your diabetes."

"The good thing is the research is all catching up now," Kelly says. "The momentum's building. I can see the change coming. And when people see this show they're going to see it too and understand. It's exciting."



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Michael Mosley with Ray Kelly, who helps people reverse type 2 diabetes. PHOTO: DAVID DARE PARKER