

ANTHROPOMETRIC MEASUREMENTS OF PRE-SCHOOL ABORIGINAL CHILDREN IN RURAL NEW SOUTH WALES

M. DOWLING* D. CONDON-PAOLONI** and T. COYNE*

400 Aboriginal pre-school aged children, residing in 10 communities in New South Wales were included in a survey of nutritional status. Weight, height, skinfold and arm measurements were collected on all children according to international standards by two trained personnel. Reference standards of the World Health Organization (1978) and the NH&MRC (1975) were used for analyzing the weight and height data.

The growth of Aboriginal children, in both height and weight, falls behind Australian and international standards. Boys begin to lag after 6 months of age, girls' weight begins to fall after 1 year and height after two years.

Height for age is considered an indicator of past or chronic malnutrition. After 12 months of age, large numbers of the Aboriginal children in our survey are below international standards. 35% of 1-2 year olds and 45% of 4-5 year olds are below standards, indicating a stunting effect early in life and increasing in the older children.

Using weight for height as an index of present malnutrition, only the 1-2 year age group showed a large number (17%) of children below standards. The other age groups had the expected numbers of children both above and below standard weight for height.

Mean triceps and subscapular skinfold measurements and arm muscle measurements compare favourably to international standards in most age groups. Only in the 1-2 year age range do more children fall below standards than would be expected.

The findings suggest that some improvement may have been affected in the growth of Aboriginal children over the past decade. Smaller percentages of children in this sample fall below the 10th percentiles of height and weight than in earlier studies. This may be due to improved health services offered to the Aboriginal people over the past decade.

The survey provides base-line data which can be used to evaluate existing and future programmes directed at improving the nutritional status of Aboriginal children and may also be used to assess any changes of general health status in the Aboriginal community.

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION. Growth Chart (1978) Geneva.
NATIONAL HEALTH and MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (1975) Canberra

* Aboriginal Health Section, Health Commission of New South Wales, Sydney, 2000.

** Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania (presently living in Wollongong).