

Lifting the profile of Australian nutrition research

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Achievements

1. Nutrition research and its interpretation and communication have led to healthier diets and improved health in Australia.
2. Australian nutritionists have, individually and collectively, made major contributions to the advancement of national health outcomes, to policy development on health issues, to the national dietary guidelines and to the collection of national data relating to food consumption, food composition, food safety and risk prevalence.
3. Australian nutritional research has achieved international distinction in several fields of nutrition and dietetics. Australian nutritionists have been leaders at international level in matters of nutritional science, policy and organisation.
4. In the last twenty years, academic institutions have established graduate training and teaching programs, leading to the improved status of the dietetic profession and to greater opportunities for research.
5. Food industry has made available a wide range of new products shown by research to be highly nutritious and health advantaged.
6. These achievements have been made despite the numerically small community of nutrition scientists, the consistent underfunding of this area of science and medicine, the undervaluing of nutrition as a major discipline and by the failure of policy in the food system to recognise the key importance of nutrition in the generation of national wealth that derives from improved health.

Deficiencies and obstacles

1. A major failure has been to improve the health of Aboriginal Australians despite the recognition of major dietary deficiencies.
2. Insufficient collaboration among Australian nutritionists despite the recognition of an inadequate critical mass in many research initiatives.
3. Failure by governments to maintain momentum in the food and nutrition policy areas, leading to inadequate food and nutrition monitoring, incomplete food composition data, and indifferent consideration of health outcomes by government agencies responsible for food issues.
4. Failure to convince funding agencies of the key role of nutrition research in health policy and outcomes, and of

the equivalence of the discipline of nutrition with that of other scientific and medical endeavours.

5. Inadequate communication between nutritionists and other food and health providers, and government.
6. Failure by decision makers in agriculture and food policy areas to appreciate the critical linkages between nutrition research and health delivery to optimise health outcomes.
7. Inefficient planning of careers for graduate students beyond vocational training.
8. Poor standard of nutrition knowledge by the medical profession leading to unsatisfactory nutrition counselling of the community.
9. Minor inclusion of practising health professionals in the overall national research effort.
10. Indifference to, and suspicion by a body of nutritionists of the role that food industry can play in providing a greater range of foods for healthy choices and reluctance to collaborate with industry in the development and promotion of such products.
11. A food regulatory environment that is slow to respond to the need to link advancing nutrition knowledge with more explicit health related messages about foods.
12. Food industry funding that is inadequate in its internal R & D effort and that favours, in its external linkages, short-term applied over longer term strategic research.
13. Inadequate opportunities and incentives for young medical graduates to become trained in clinical nutrition.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Ensure that, in national organisations concerned with health, nutritionists are fully represented, to determine priorities in nutrition research based on the most urgent needs for improving the health of Australians.
2. In particular, a National Nutrition Committee should be restored within either NH and MRC or the Commonwealth department concerned with health.
3. Guarantee a framework for nutrition within all government food policies from agriculture to manufacturing and export.
4. Close communication be established among all major groups providing and consuming food in order to increase the influence of nutrition in health outcomes.
5. Foster enthusiastic collaboration among nutritionists, research scientists in allied disciplines and food providers to establish the critical mass of knowledge

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- and skills required to tackle the highest priority nutrition-related health problems; consideration to be given to diverse models for collaboration including the clustering of research workers.
6. Improvement in funding will require raising standards of research skills, better communication, clearer identification of the customer base and capability to influence opinion.
 7. Aboriginal health requires a major input from health workers better trained in nutrition and supported by access to healthier diets, and that it be self-determined and managed to accord with local culture and tradition.
 8. Commitment by government acting in conjunction with nutritionists and researchers for regular monitoring of the Australian food supply and of the nutritional status of the population.
 9. The future of nutrition research lies in better structured training programs, greater attention to career opportunities and increased funding in order to attract the highest calibre undergraduate and graduate scholars.
 10. Assistance for medical practitioners with nutrition information and resources; and increased nutrition training in undergraduate medical courses.
 11. The profile of nutrition must be raised further within the food industry, both internally and externally through better collaboration and communication with research providers and teachers of food scientists.
 12. Government to ensure a food regulatory structure that encourages development and marketing of foods that have, through nutritional evaluation and scientific substantiation, been shown to possess specific advantages for health.
 13. Nutrition researchers to acquire training in a range of skills in the advancing areas of molecular and genetic nutrition, and analytical and information technologies in order to participate in the planning and development of major changes in the future food supply.
 14. Collaboration with journalists to reduce the number of confusing messages about nutrition and to present research findings in an objective and disciplined manner.
 15. Development of a code of practice, supportive of both sides, for the relation between nutrition scientists and the food industry.
 16. The status of health professionals would be raised by providing readier access to new information and opportunity to participate in research.
 17. A Federation of biological Sciences including nutrition be established in order to broaden the community of nutrition researchers and raise the profile of nutrition research.