

CHANGING ATTITUDES TO DIET AND NUTRITION

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I. INTRODUCTION

(a) Seeking long-term health

The community generally has a far more long-term outlook on health than used to be the case. There are two dimensions to this. Firstly, with the increasing "elasticity" of age (the blue-rinse set has disappeared, Jane Fonda is in her mid-fifties and the notion of being elderly stretches further out) there is a greater emphasis today on prolonging personal vitality in order to maximise "life options".

Secondly, there is the issue of minimising the risks of "modern diseases". People no longer believe that these are the result of heredity or fate. Recent research undertaken by DRG indicated, for example, that "good diet" and "exercise" were together attributed a 75% contribution to maintaining long-term health while well over 90% of the population believed that a "good diet" played an essential role in avoiding problems such as heart disease and even cancer. In this respect, people have largely embraced the notion of personal responsibility for their physical well-being and are increasingly adopting a "preventative" stance towards health.

II. INCREASED KNOWLEDGE

The fall-out of the "health revolution", which had its roots in the 70s, is now being felt deep in the community. Consumers today perceive themselves to be far better informed about diet and its physical effects than was their parents' generation. While literal knowledge may often be fairly superficial and indeed misconceptions do abound, it is nevertheless true that people today strongly identify with being more knowledgeable about nutrition.

(a) Accessibility to variety

The emphasis on variety, which is a major thrust within the nutrition area, has been accelerated by the sheer choice of foods that are currently available. This is reflected, for example, in the range of fresh produce sold today: alfalfa, bean sprouts, Chinese vegetables, star fruit and tamarillos in greengrocers, pre-prepared satay sticks and spiced marinated stir fry in the butcher, countless varieties of bread in the bakery. Such items are fairly recent components of the Australian diet. Variety is also gaining impetus from proliferating packaged goods, changing cooking styles (stir frying is in the regular repertoire of 61% of female household cooks) and the widespread accommodation of ethnic foods into everyday eating as the effects of multiculturalism in Australia are absorbed.

Asian food is very popular with Thai being particularly favoured; it is perceived to be lighter and fresher than the familiar Chinese and not to contain the "dreaded MSG". Still there is common familiarity with other ethnic cuisines such as Malaysian, Vietnamese, Lebanese, alongside a current, smallish fad for Tex-Mex. Italian has of course been established for some time but it too is assuming new dimensions. Pasta is extremely popular and has assumed a new "sophistication" in that sauces are considerably more adventurous and open to experimentation. While some certainly still eat "spag bol", the repertoire is now significantly extended.

As horizons broaden, the trial of new dishes is encouraged by the very availability of a wide range of food ingredients and products such as packaged sauce bases. In the "trendy" areas, fresh herbs such as coriander, lemon grass, marjoram and basil, sit along side fruit and veg even in supermarkets.

This is not to say of course that traditional "bland" food does not have its place and that the "meat and 3 veg" plate does not still feature in the Australian diet. However, it is essential to appreciate the sheer extent of new experimentation with food.

III. MAIN TRENDS IN NEEDS

In terms of trends which might have any bearing, even if fairly indirect, on the outlook on diet, there are six in particular which warrant mention.

(a) "Real" food

If there were one factor significantly characterising consumers' current attitudes towards diet it would be the thrust of the "real" food concept. This has, in itself, a number of dimensions:

- Consumers lay considerable store on good quality and, above all, "fresh" food, an idea which has of course been picked up by the supermarket chains (Woolworth's "We are the fresh food people", Franklin's Big Fresh stores). While, in practice, the ideal of fresh food is not always followed through in eating habits, there is, nevertheless, certainly a strong identification with the concept that "fresh is best".
- Along with an emphasis on "real" food comes an increasing concern about "chemicals". This was reflected in a recent study undertaken by DRG. When a cross-section of the community was questioned on "concerns about food today", around 60% volunteered, with no prompting, that "chemicals", in some form, were a problem. What is interesting is that the focus on chemicals has moved beyond just resistance to the "artificial ingredients" used in manufacturing such as preservatives, colour and flavours (although these still draw considerable attention). Consumers are increasingly objecting to the use of chemicals in the growing and preparation of "fresh" food; pesticides, artificial fertilisers, growth hormones, life prolonging storing and ripening agents.
- "Real" food also means authenticity. This is being reflected in a growing need for sensory gratification. There is, firstly, a desire for genuine flavour which is being increasingly delivered in packaged foods (e.g. premium ice creams, quality bottled pasta sauces, ground coffee identified by countries of origin). Along with concerns about taste, there are greater demands placed on texture, appearance and smell within the "real" food syndrome. It is for this reason no doubt that hot bread shops, for example, currently hold over 20% share of bread sales in Sydney. (Figures for other locations unknown.)

Needs in this area are being better met by manufacturers today as pre-prepared products achieve higher standards and, sometimes, are better than the home-made article. The trend towards freshly prepared foods of various kinds is, however, at this stage likely still underdeveloped in Australia if the chiller cabinet offerings in both the U.S. and Europe are taken into account. Supermarkets have hardly hit their stride as fast food or take-away outlets. The important point is that packaged no longer necessarily means processed.

(b) Function foods

As noted, preventative health measures are really coming of age. The maxim "you are what you eat" does not just refer to how people feel today but relates also to their future quality of life. In terms of food, this puts a new emphasis not only on how various nutrients

affect weight, energy, the general condition of body tone, skin, hair, eyes and so forth but also on their prophylactic effect, how they nourish the essential balance and strength of the body's systems (or "inner" health).

The contribution of food to health in the preventative sense is liable to become increasingly important. Building up immunities to, or otherwise counteracting, particular health problems (the province of so-called "function foods") is a key new trend. It is in its relative infancy although, pertinently, in a recent study, when consumers were asked to nominate nutrients which fostered long-term health, over 80% could nominate at least one item.

Examples of these so-called function foods are as follows:

- The role of calcium in the prevention of osteoporosis.
- The function of iron in carrying oxygen in the blood, sustaining the "life system" and building immunity to disease.
- The pertinence of cruciferous vegetables (e.g. broccoli) in minimising the risk of cancer. No new age fad, this is promoted by mainstream nutritionists.

Extreme as it may sound, foods, in the spirit of nutritherapy, are sometimes as likely to be embraced for their nutritional "character" as for their specific and literal health benefits. Vegetables and grains, for example, are presently "centre stage" in dietary accolades at least in part because of their general image as nutritionally "vital", intensely life enhancing. In these times, a "restorative" diet is liable to focus very heavily on carbohydrates.

(c) The new meaning of varied diet

While varied diet once meant no more than ensuring a good selection from the different food groups, today the concept embraces a wide range of flavours, types of dishes and cooking styles. When consumers attempt to differentiate contemporary dietary values from those of the past, variety is one of the factors strongly emphasised.

Variety has two particular implications:

- It relates to sheer taste gratification and a more expansive outlook on food experiences.
- Variety has become almost synonymous with the very idea of nutritional soundness. Diets which include a wide repertoire of food are inevitably perceived to be superior.

(d) The lighter eating syndrome

Consumers refer incessantly to the notion of moderation. This is hardly a new dietary notion but its meaning is changing. Moderation is moving on from its long established implication: "everything is OK so long as you don't overdo it". The more specific notion of lightness is assuming greater importance. It is linked, in a particular sense, to both weight control and easy digestion but, in a broader vein, it is associated with greater energy, vitality and alertness. It is also the point where traditional dieting (for weight loss) practices converge with healthy eating. This is especially important to women and is most prevalent in the younger age group. It means smaller meals, lower calories, lighter food.

It is this factor which is behind the popularity of "modified" foods and especially low fat and no added sugar products. Their values are, however, broader than simply their cholesterol and weight ramifications. They are part of a new mode of eating.

This is not to say of course that consumers do not partake of, and enjoy, richer food with strong sensory appeal. Tucking into Mum's roast, a cream pudding, chocolate or hot chips is still acknowledged as highly enjoyable. However, such foods have a decreasing relevance as a "way of life" in a growing sector of the market.

Light food should not be confused with minimalist food which rings of pretension. Grazing and snack meals may be growing in popularity and meals may be smaller but some substance (in a nutritional sense and not to be confused with heaviness) is still sought in a sit down meal.

In this area of light eating, the community is following through on its own precepts. There have, for example, been measurable declines in the consumption of sugar, fat and red meat with commensurate increases in carbohydrate intake and particularly of vegetables, cereals, rice and pasta.

With this shift in eating patterns has come a new interest in vegetarianism amongst some females and stretching to a minority of younger males. While this is an elastic term and generally means less emphasis on red meat, there is also an increasing interest in vegetarianism "proper", if not necessarily as a way of life, then at least as a part of the diet. Vegetarian dishes are no longer seen as the turf of an alien fringe but a legitimate feature of sensible eating.

(e) The convenience mode

Today's lifestyles are highly conducive to convenience eating. Time has become a much valued commodity. People live busy, hectic lives. Working women, increased outside interests, family member mobility, the growth in single households, all are contributing to "fast food", whether from commercial sources or prepared in the home.

As noted, snacking and "grazing" have become more commonplace. Indeed, it is of interest that while mothers, for example, still consider a "proper" meal important "during the week", this "week" is shrinking. After late-night shopping, take away food is considered permissible, Friday is the beginning of the weekend when more casual food is acceptable, the weekend itself has always been a time for less formal eating. In some cases, this essentially means that the family might sit down to as few as four or even three traditional "meals" on a weekly basis.

The significant point here is that "quick and convenient" has become such an integral part of life that it is no longer necessarily attended by guilt and not least because of the improved quality of packaged foods and the gestures made towards health by the fast food chains (e.g. the proliferation of salad bars, Tender Roast [not fried] chicken).

(f) Increasing correspondence of needs

Another key and important dimension of the market is the increasing correspondence of needs that were once essentially trade-offs: taste, health, convenience, value and variety. So, for example, "health food" was not so long ago barely associated with taste, being labelled either "rabbit food" or, alternatively, perceived as the fare of the "lentil brigade". Moreover, health food was hardly synonymous with variety or convenience, unless of course an apple and a banana were counted.

Today, variety abounds in what might be termed "healthy" food, to the point where it is, as mentioned, even available in fast food chains. On the domestic front, a plate of stir-fried vegetables with a douse of Thai sauce is light and nutritious eating with strong appetite appeal (at least to women).

Convenience was not so long ago unlikely to afford value. Indeed, the opposite was more likely to be true. Today, a take away meal (e.g. a chicken and roast potatoes for \$6.00) may cost no more than the home-made version.