Dietary patterns, food-based guidelines and nutrition

Policy Position Statement

Key messages:
1. Contemporary nutrition evidence requires the provision of diets that are environmentally sustainable, healthy, affordable, reliable, and meet consumer preferences.
2. This shift in evidence requires a change in emphasis from the historically narrow focus on nutrients, to a broader understanding of foods and how they are combined into total diets (i.e. dietary patterns).

Key policy positions:
1. Current dietary patterns in Australia are leading contributors to ill health, not because of the imbalance of one or two nutrients, but due to a combination of factors collectively contributing to ill health.
2. The PHAA calls for a more comprehensive and holistic approach to the development of dietary guidelines and nutrition policies that reflects contemporary evidence on foods and dietary patterns.

Audience: Federal, State and Territory Governments, policymakers and program managers, PHAA members, media.

Responsibility: PHAA Food & Nutrition Special Interest Group

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PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Nutrition science encompasses the study of dietary patterns, foods and nutrients. The study of nutrients provides the opportunity to establish mechanisms of action within the human body, and the study of foods recognises the synergies between nutrients within a food or beverage and health impacts on the human body. The study of dietary patterns encompasses the “combination of foods and beverages one eats on a regular basis” that can be combined and collectively influence health outcomes.

2. Nutrition science has expanded from a primarily nutrient-model which sought to determine diet-related risk in terms of nutrient deficiency or excess, towards a model which explores health and disease through the effects of foods and dietary patterns.

3. This expansion in knowledge and understanding should be reflected in Australia’s nutrition guidelines and policies. The development and implementation of a National Nutrition Strategy would enable coordinated, evidence-based action that integrates nutrient-based, food-based, and dietary patterns approaches.

PHAA notes the following evidence:

4. There is good evidence that a variety of dietary patterns can contribute to improved health outcomes.

5. A dietary pattern is defined as the quantities, proportions, variety, or combination of different foods, drinks and nutrients in diets, and the frequency with which they are habitually consumed.

6. A healthy dietary pattern typically includes a high proportion of minimally processed foods such as fruits, nuts, seeds, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, seafood, yogurt, and vegetable oils; and a low proportion of red meats, processed meats, and foods rich in refined grains, starches, and added sugars. Such dietary patterns are typically higher in fibre, vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and unsaturated fats, and lower in glycemic index, glycemic load, salt, and trans fat.

7. Current dietary patterns are a leading contributor to disease burden in Australia. The mismatch between current and optimal dietary patterns is not due to the imbalance of one or two nutrients but a combination of dietary risks which collectively contribute to ill health.

8. Dietary risks are defined by Australian Institute for Health and Welfare (AIHW) as the combined effect of 13 dietary risks identified as a diet low in: fruit, vegetables, nuts & seeds, wholegrains, fibre, omega-3 fatty acids, milk, calcium and a diet high in: processed meat, saturated fat, sweetened beverages, sodium and red meat.

9. In recent years, there has been a global shift towards development of food-based dietary guidelines to promote healthy dietary patterns and lifestyles.
10. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) *Australian Dietary Guidelines* are an example of food-based guidelines, supplemented with nutrient-based guidance through the definition of discretionary food and drinks.

11. There is ongoing work and discussion on how to effectively categorise discretionary foods and drinks which should be limited or excluded from an optimal dietary pattern. These range from methods such as a nutrient-based nutrient-profiling model to classifying foods according to their degree of processing.

12. From a policy perspective, there is evidence that tools including labelling and reformulation are effective in changing intakes of some (i.e. sodium and industrially-produced trans fat), but not all, risk-associated nutrients. There is limited evidence these policy tools can fundamentally shift current diets towards optimal dietary patterns. This suggests different policy tools are needed for different purposes, and no single policy will improve current diets. A variety of policies are required to address food-based priorities and nutrient based-priorities and support individual, community and food system change towards healthier dietary patterns. This underlines the importance of a National Nutrition Policy to ensure such policy coordination is achieved in Australia.

13. At present the monitoring and reporting of nutrition status in Australia is heavily reliant on nutrient-based and food-based measures. There is a building evidence base for measuring dietary intake through validated measures of dietary patterns.

14. Implementing this policy would contribute towards the achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goals 3 – Good Health and Wellbeing.

**PHAA seeks the following actions:**

15. The development of a National Nutrition Policy which is informed by a nutrition science based ‘Fit-for-Purpose’ framework that guides the selection of dietary patterns, food-based and/or nutrient-based approaches to nutrition in accordance with which approach aligns with the purpose of the Strategy/Policy.

16. That all policy-makers (within and outside government) are cognisant of potential unintended (adverse) impacts on Australian diets if one approach (i.e. nutrient-based or food-based or dietary patterns) is favoured to the exclusion of other approaches.

17. The regular and routine monitoring and reporting on the dietary behaviours of Australians through a combination of dietary pattern, food and nutrient approaches. This requires investment in methodologies and infrastructure, such as development and maintenance of a contemporary food composition database, and dietary assessment tools such as ASA24, as well as broader support of skills in analytical methods.

18. The regular review (5 yearly cycle) of the Australian Dietary Guidelines.

**PHAA resolves to:**

19. Advocate for the above steps to be taken based on the principles in this position statement.

ADOPTED September 2019
References