



PILLAR 1

SOCIETAL

DETERMINANTS

Nutrition in context

Executive summary

Individuals' dietary choices are driven by a confluence of complex and competing influences.

Developing effective public health strategies requires a systems perspective to understand how food systems influence food environments and drive dietary patterns.

A strategy that addresses structural obstacles which discourage or prevent individuals from making good decisions about their diet and health is key to improving the health and wellbeing of all Australians.

Context, challenges and opportunities

Unravelling the complex societal interactions that influence individuals' dietary options and choices is essential for effective, evidence-based public health strategies and policy actions.

- Australia has continuing and pressing issues in nutrition insecurity, particularly in disadvantaged and remote communities, as well as well-documented challenges in addressing rising rates of obesity, diabetes and other diet-related chronic conditions.
- Food and nutrient intake, nutrition status, and related health outcomes within the Australian population are not regularly monitored as part of a coordinated system, resulting in a lack of timely information on how food intake is impacting the health outcomes for Australians.

Individual and community knowledge, attitudes, skills, perceptions, beliefs and motivations around food and dietary patterns directly impact nutrition, health and wellbeing outcomes for the Australian population.

- Effects of structural attributes of food environments¹, including marketing and media (conventional, social and electronic), and government and private sector policies on population health and attitudes towards nutrition are not assessed, benchmarked or monitored.

Expanding the science of nutrition to encompass the influence of societal issues on dietary behaviour in addition to the physiological and biological impacts of nutrition, will enable the translation of nutrition research into disease prevention.

- The current epidemic of nutrition-related non-communicable diseases has resulted from societal changes (including industrialisation and globalisation of food systems), rather than changes in the human genome, physiology or nutrient requirements.

There is an urgent need to prioritise research on how modern food environments (including the relative availability, affordability, accessibility and acceptability of healthy and unhealthy foods, and the influence of aggressive marketing strategies) influence individuals' food and dietary behaviours.

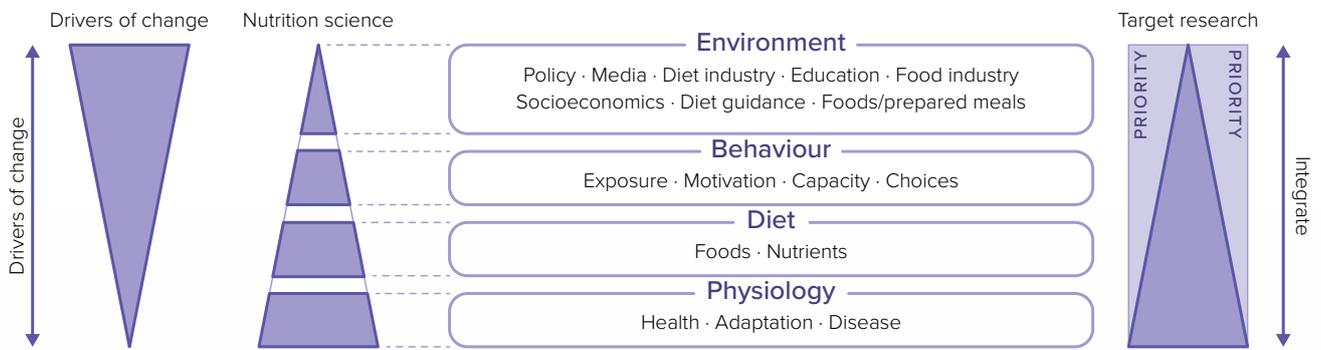
- Doing so will enable food systems that support equitable access to healthy dietary options and effective population nutrition interventions to be realised and supported by scientifically informed national policy frameworks.
- A coordinated, systematic strategy for quantitative mapping of Australia's food and nutrient intake and health will facilitate cost-effective use of resources and enhance the impact of nutrition messages, programs and policies.

Recommendations and actions needed

Recommendation 1: Broaden nutrition science to encompass and prioritise research into factors that influence dietary behaviour and identify effective interventions and pathways to implementation

Improving diets would substantially improve Australian health. Identifying and developing effective interventions to overcome obstacles which prevent people from following existing National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) evidence-based Australian dietary guidelines requires understanding the wide range of factors that influence individuals' dietary decisions.

¹ The collective physical, economic, policy and sociocultural surroundings, opportunities and conditions that influence people's food and beverage choices and nutritional status.



Recommendation 2: Develop and test behavioural economic models to identify factors that influence consumer demand for healthy products over unhealthy processed foods

Improving the market competitiveness of new generation agrifood products, that retain the benefits of food processing without negative health impacts, would improve the quality of Australian diets and health. Ameliorating competition between health objectives and commercial interests which drive negative dietary outcomes requires understanding consumer demand and fostering capability in the burgeoning agrifood and nutritech sectors.

Recommendation 3: Establish structures to enhance cohesion of nutrition and related sciences in Australia

Establishing a national ‘trusted voice’ on nutrition issues would provide consistent, independent evidence-based guidance for nutrition-relevant policy matters and clarify messaging on nutrition issues. This voice has the potential to have two key functions. Firstly, to be the source of advice and guidance to government on nutrition public policy and identify evidence gaps that would inform research needs. Secondly, to combat the substantial negative impacts on diet and health derived from ‘spurious uncertainty’ which intentionally undermines evidence-based knowledge, the trusted voice is needed to unify and represent the nutrition science community and provide a single point of contact for the general public on general nutrition messaging while reinforcing the need for appropriate referral to qualified nutrition health professionals.

Recommendation 4: Encourage the scientific community to be proactive in exposing diet messaging based on ideology and other ulterior motives, including financial gain

Clearly delineating between evidence-based information and unsubstantiated opinion in nutrition and diet messaging would empower individuals to make informed decisions. Misinformation about the links between diet and health has the potential to be a serious public health hazard. Elevating the weight of evidence-based nutrition in the public discourse and decision-making requires establishing a culture of accountability on diet and nutrition issues and better tackling vested commercial interests and determinants of health.

Recommendation 5: Found a national nutrition collective, representing all stakeholder groups, that will establish approaches for modernising nutrition science and practice in Australia

Harnessing cross-sectoral expertise would enable development of public health strategies to address key health challenges in Australia, including the burden of malnutrition in all its forms (undernutrition, overnutrition and imbalanced nutrition). Multidisciplinary collaboration is required to understand the complex interactions of societal influences on dietary behaviour.

Reference

1 Swinburn, B., Sacks, G., Vandevijvere, S., Kumanyika, S., Lobstein, T., Neal, B., Barquera, S., Friel, S., Hawkes, C., Kelly, B., L’Abbé, M., Lee, A., Ma, J., Macmullan, J., Mohan, S., Monteiro, C., Rayner, M., Sanders, D., Snowdon, W., Walker, C. and (2013), INFORMAS overview. *Obes Rev*, 14: 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.12087>



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