Food Policy Symposium

Strengthening food and nutrition policy action from global to local levels

Please tweet your questions using #IPANFoodPolicy hashtag
The science and politics of a national nutrition policy

IPAN Food Policy seminar
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• I alone am responsible for the views expressed in this presentation and they do not necessarily represent the views, decisions or policies of the institutions [FSANZ Board, WHO, Cochrane, NHMRC, IUNS] with which I am affiliated.
Food manufacturers will not mourn the resignation of NFA chief Gae Pincus, reports JODIE BROUGTH

The resignation of Gae Pincus this week from the National Food Authority, amid allegations she was virtually forced out of her statutory office, has not been welcomed by the industry she regulated for three years. Even before she went, sniping by the industry was out of control. The industry journal Foodweek cited Ms Pincus had failed to impose the NFA chair since returning to industry.

Consumer groups argue the food industry wants fortification because it is an effective marketing tool: think of the breakfast cereal industry's obsession with images of healthy athletes and happy families.

They say putting things that are not necessary into food is inviting trouble, as the health benefits are unproven and some additives might actually have a negative impact. They say people should be taught good nutrition, not to think of the food industry as an ethical best practice and agreed international food standards, including Australia's commitment to the GATT, industry persuaded the ministers to tell the food regulator to allow any vitamins to be added to foods unless they could prove a health risk existed,
Australians are bombarded by mixed messages on health and nutrition. They need help to navigate that maze with accurate evidence-based data. Happy reading.

Leaked documents:

“action plans to target “key media influencers” who might be agreeable to “neutralising negative coverage on breakfast cereals by actively engaging with the media””

“campaigns to generate “paid influencer posts” to achieve positive social media activity”

1. Introduction

• Dietary risk factors are leading contributors to the global and Australian burden of disease

  • Dietary excess
    • 63% of adults overweight and obese
    • 25% of children overweight and obese

  • Dietary inadequacies
    • All age/gender groups under-consuming recommended number of serves of 5 food groups

  • Dietary imbalances
    • 35% (adults), 39% (children) energy derived from ‘discretionary’ foods
What are the recommendations?

1. **Increase** 5 food group food consumption  
   - All age/gender groups under-consuming 5FG foods

2. **Decrease** discretionary food consumption  
   - 35% (adults), 39% (children) E from discretionary foods
Healthy AND sustainable diets

Environmental sustainability

Dietary patterns
2. Science and politics of nutrition policy approaches

• “People tend to use scientific knowledge to reinforce beliefs that have already been shaped by their worldview” [Kahan]

• The way that different worldviews frame the cause of and solution to a PHN problem can be captured in three nutrition paradigms:
  • Medical paradigm
  • Lifestyle paradigm
  • Socio-ecological paradigm
Socio-ecological paradigm

Framing = social and ecological determinants of nutritional health and/or food system integrity causing biological and environmental impacts among populations

Lifestyle paradigm

Framing = Dietary imbalances and/or behaviour causing nutrient deficiencies, elevated risk factor levels and physiological dysfunctions in individuals and populations

Medical paradigm

Framing = Inadequate single or multiple nutrient intake causing deficiency and physiological dysfunction in individuals and populations

Enabling environment

Nutrition-sensitive actions

Nutrition-specific actions

Naude, Durao, Lawrence, Cochrane Nutrition Field, 2018
National Nutrition Policy progress

“The current dietary guidelines are in place and could be a positive place to drive implementation within the NNP.”
But, then the policy approach suddenly changed ...

Senator the Hon Fiona Nash
Minister for Rural Health
Deputy Leader of The Nationals in the Senate

MEDIA RELEASE

8 November, 2015

Healthy Food Partnership to tackle obesity and encourage healthy eating
Released - Scoping Study for an Australian National Nutrition Policy

Published on March 10, 2016

Mark Lock
Director - Committix Pty Ltd

Introduction

After a lengthy freedom of information request (more of that story here), I paid $875 to receive a $203,684 taxpayer funded paper. Officially titled "Scoping study to inform development of the National Nutrition Policy for Australia"

The Scoping study cover shows the date of 20 July 2013, and only now is available to Australian citizens in March 2016. Why has it taken an FOI request to make the Scoping study public? Why has it taken five years (2011 to 2016) to get only this Scoping study conducted in the broader plan to develop an Australian National Nutrition Policy?
3. The science and politics of nutrition policy interventions

• Many interventions require a scheme to rate food ‘healthiness’:
  • Front-of-package labels
  • Reformulation
  • Food service (school food) provision
  • Food marketing restrictions
  • Taxation to limit consumption of unhealthy food

• Nutrition science orientations to assess ‘healthiness’:
  • Nutrient
  • Food
  • Dietary pattern
  • Food System
Nutrient orientation to nutrition science

Nutrient adequacy
Simple, linear cause – effect relationships
Food orientation to nutrition science

NOVA groups foods according to the extent and purpose of their processing.

Consumption of UP foods is associated with: impaired diet quality; BMI; metabolic syndrome; and risk of certain cancers

Dietary pattern orientation to nutrition science

- Existing dietary guideline knowledge base
- Systematic, umbrella and narrative reviews
- Evidence Report >55k peer-reviewed papers
- Expert reports (WCRF, government reports, etc)
- Nutrient Reference Values
- The food modelling system

Dietary patterns are more than the sum of the individual nutrients and foods they contain
Food systems orientation to nutrition science

‘Nutrition and Food Systems’, HLPE, 2017
Rethinking nutrition science
Nutrient (reductionist) → diet (holistic)

“This early work established a paradigm in nutrition science of reductionism ... which may seek a single nutrients or single food solution to a complex nutritional concern ... we need now to consider how to incorporate ‘optimal’ nutrition in the form of whole diets and dietary patterns”
The tyranny of nutrition reductionism

“increasing EPA and DHA has little or no effect on mortality or cardiovascular health ...”
Competing applications: assessing a food’s ‘healthiness’

“people eat whole foods rather than single nutrients ... these Guidelines make recommendations based only on whole foods ... rather than recommendations related to specific food components and individual nutrients”

“The number of stars is determined using a calculator (driven by an algorithm) designed to assess positive and risk nutrients in food”

“NOVA is the food classification that categorises foods according to the extent and purpose of food processing, rather than in terms of nutrients”

[Nutrient profiling] [Food profiling] [Diet profiling]
How well aligned is the HSR with dietary guideline recommendations?

57% of discretionary foods displayed an HSR of ≥2.5 stars [Lawrence, et al, 2018]
How well aligned is the HSR with NOVA?

• A skewing towards ultra-processed foods displaying an HSR
• A substantial proportion of ultra-processed foods displaying an HSR of ≥2.5 stars [Dickie, et al, Under review]
Why are there different interpretations of alignment?


- 86.6% of products received a HSR aligned with their ADG classification.
- Outliers were ‘discretionary’ products that received HSR ≥ 3.5.

A review of 47,000 foods has found that health stars provide sound dietary advice on more than 97% of products.
Disappointingly, it also found that only 7.5% of products displayed health stars.
Well done on the research!
Food star ratings are actually fairly accurate, large audit concludes

When the stars don't align, dietary guidelines are often to blame
“Approximately 82% of all products analysed had a HSR that aligned with the range corresponding to its classification as a core or discretionary \( [\leq 3.5] \) food by the Australian Dietary Guidelines.”

So, the HSR on these foods is aligned with the ADGs ...
Dubious reformulation promotion

In 2016, Public Health England set a voluntary target for the industry to reduce the level of sugar in foods by a fifth by 2020.

“We’re pleased that Mondelez is the latest Household name to commit to offering healthier products,” PHE, July 2018, The Guardian
Conflicted interests?

BOWLED OVER AT BREAKFAST
New Australian data on the nutritional profile of breakfast cereals and their impact on nutrient intakes and body weight.
Opportunity to correct HSR flaws

• Adjust technical flaws:
  • Increase penalty for added sugar, remove penalty for intrinsic sugars
  • Decrease incentive for gaming the system

• Reform the design:
  • Demarcate 5FG/Discretionary foods
  • Align with NOVA classification

• Governance
  • Manage COI: Industry as observers, not deciders
  • Once all above met, then mandate
The need for nutrition science expertise for nutrition policy-making

- Knowledge in nutrition concepts and theory, e.g. distinctions between: nutrient –; food –; dietary pattern –; and food system – health relationships

- Skills in nutrition research methods

- Communication in nutrition advice
  - “Communicating the intricacies of nutrition science is challenging. Added to this complexity is the issue of those with no nutrition training using social media and other channels to give advice and guide the public towards inappropriate diets.”

Towards a Decadal Plan for Australian Nutrition Science
Concluding comments

• Science provides compelling evidence for a national nutrition policy

• Politics has created a battle over what policy should look like
  • discrete interventions vs coherent all-of-government approach
  • Interventions dominated by a reductionist (nutrient) worldview

• Too often nutrition science has been sidelined

• Need for nutrition science to be restored to policy-making processes