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Healthy and Environmentally Sustainable Diets Briefing Paper

Position

It is the position of Dietitians Australia that to promote human and planetary health, the population needs to adopt healthy and sustainable diet-related practices, alongside complete food system transformation that supports and enables these practices. Across the entire continuum of dietetic practice from policy action to individual nutrition therapy, dietitians can play a critical role in minimising the environmental degradation caused by our food system, while simultaneously improving public health outcomes.

Recommendations

1. The development of a comprehensive national food and nutrition policy with consideration of health, equity and sustainability outcomes.
2. The prominent integration of sustainability principles within future iterations of Australia's national dietary guidelines.
3. Investment in interventions to inform consumers about sustainable dietary choices such as a food labelling system and social marketing campaigns.
4. Consideration of the environmental impact of dietary behaviours, across the diverse practice areas and settings where Dietitians work (eg. hospitals, food industry, schools, early learning centres, recreation & community centres)
5. Adequately resourced measures to reduce commercial and domestic food-related waste.

Background

Our current global food system is creating more greenhouse gas emissions than any other single contributor, depleting precious land and water, and driving biodiversity loss.[1, 2] Here in Australia, our national food system has vast environmental impacts. The agricultural sector is responsible for 16% of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions as well as biodiversity loss, water consumption and land use and there are further impacts during food processing, transport and storage.[3] Poor quality diets are the leading preventable risk factor for chronic disease, particularly amongst lower socio-economic groups.[4, 5] Additionally, 27% of diet related emissions come from nutrient-poor non-core foods, further catalysing climate change with little nutritional return.[6]

However, this relationship between our food system and our climate is bidirectional. Climate change and poor environmental conditions also affects our food supply and security, for example through decreased crop yield, availability and quality, which adversely affects health.[7]

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This requires a change to both food production and consumption practices to ensure current and future generations are nourished within planetary boundaries.[8] In 2019, the EAT-Lancet Commission advised that "nothing less than a Great Food Transformation" is required, including a global shift towards healthy and sustainable diets (HSD).[8] Global targets are an effective mechanism for driving such change.[9] For example, the United Nations' (UN) Decade of Action on Nutrition commits UN Member States, including Australia, to implement public health policy to create sustainable, resilient food systems for healthy diets for all.[10] Efforts to improve our food system can have far-reaching benefits – improving food security and nutrition, social and gender equity, community resilience and more.[11]

It is agreed that a whole-of-system approach is required, and efforts to promote HSDs can trigger action across the entire food system.[11, 12] The food system has described as having six phases which make up "the interconnected system of everything and everybody that influences, and is influenced by, the activities involved in bringing food from farm to fork and beyond":[13]

1. Agricultural production
2. Distribution, transport and trade
3. Processing
4. Food retail/service
5. Consumption
6. Waste and disposal.

The points of intersection between diet and this broader food system present a great opportunity to achieve systemic transformation, in particular, efforts to promote the consumption of HSDs.[13]

Evidence

In 2012, the Food and Agriculture Organisation defined HSDs as those with "low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations."[14] Since then, defining and promoting the HSD has been an emerging topic of research and practice. In 2014, three broad principles of HSD were identified:

1. avoiding overconsumption,
2. reducing discretionary food intake, and
3. eating less animal and more plant-derived foods.[15]

In 2019, the planetary health diet was recommended by the EAT-Lancet Commission to nourish global populations within planetary boundaries.[8] These dietary recommendations are largely plant-based with optional inclusion of fish, meat and dairy foods and have since prompted research to explore the application and feasibility of this planetary health diet.[8] In terms of affordability, a healthy and sustainable diet (based on the EAT Lancet Commissions' Planetary Health Diet) was recently shown to be less expensive than the typical Australian food basket nationally, in all metropolitan areas and socio-economic groups in Australia.[16] Whilst the recommendations of the EAT Lancet Commission may not be appropriate for all people due to a range of individual and local factors, the broad principles of this diet must be considered in the Australian context.

Dietitians have a key role to play in facilitating the required food system transformation, as evidenced by the Dietitians of Canada's role statement for sustainable food systems and diets.[17] Dietetic practice can contribute to promoting HSD at various levels, for example in food-based dietary guidelines at the population-level, food procurement and menu planning policies at an institutional-level and in nutrition education to client groups, community groups and other health professionals, and medical nutrition therapy at the group and individual level.[18] In terms of providing specific dietary advice, dietitians can promote desired diet-related practices, which describe the many activities an individual engages in to source, store, prepare, consume and dispose of the food they eat.[19] Based on evidence from various United Nations agencies and high-level committees relevant to HSD [8, 12, 14, 20-23], these thirteen practices have been identified:

Desired healthy and environmentally sustainable diet-related practices

Where to source food?

- Strengthen local food systems by connecting with primary producers
- Eat seasonally, incorporating native and wild-harvested foods
- Eat locally available foods
- Select food grown using sustainable food production practices, valuing Indigenous knowledges

What to eat?

- Avoid over-consumption beyond caloric requirement
- Consume no more than recommended animal-derived foods
- Limit intake of ultra-processed, nutrient-poor and over-packaged food
- Increase intake of plant-based foods
- Eat a wide variety of foods to promote biodiversity

How to eat?

- Adopt food waste-minimisation strategies
- Preference home-made meals and share with others
- Consume safe tap water as preferred drink
- Breastfeed infants where possible

Each diet-related practice promotes both human and planetary health, however, must be considered as part of a larger inter-connected system. For example, choosing the right types of foods to eat as defined by the EAT-Lancet Commission's planetary health diet, will only have desired environmental benefits if those foods are sustainably sourced and the associated waste processed responsibly.[8, 19]

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