

AUSTRALIA'S FOOD CONFERENCE - TOWARDS THE NEXT CENTURY

24th March, 1988

Low Income Earners and Food

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ABSTRACT

The existence of deficient food and dietary patterns amongst low income Australians in the Bicentennial year is in itself a timely reminder that the problems of nutrition and ill-health are not simply the problems of over-abundance, over-eating and wrong dietary choices.

Some 20 per cent of our national population have insufficient incomes which mean they cannot afford proper food and therefore do not possess the range of consumer choices as is commonly, but mistakenly, assumed.

The poor spend 23.4 per cent of their low incomes on food, compared with 17.9 per cent for the top ten per cent of the income group and 19.7 per cent for the average of the total population. But it is also true that, for the poor, the payment of rent and fuel bills always takes precedence, so that, family food expenditure is frequently cut to cover those costs and the family is given high carbohydrate "fillers".

Furthermore, many poor people do not possess the knowledge, skill, resources, time or ease of access to buy and cook food which is both cheap, enjoyable and nutritious.

Care must therefore be taken to ensure that our new found enthusiasm for healthy food does not lead to victim blaming, nor the rehearsing of earlier arguments that the poor can survive well on "porridge and carrots".

The way ahead requires simultaneous action in the following areas:

- * Social policy - to deal with income security, housing and employment strategies which will reduce poverty :
- * Consumer affairs policy - to deal with television advertising of unhealthy foods, and processing practices involving artificial additives and irradiation :
- * Nutritional education aimed at food manufacturers, the general consumer population and the poor, in order to change tastes, habits and attitudes which lead to poor health.

Although food satisfies hunger and meets basic nutritional requirements, it also has important cultural and symbolic meaning. More analytical research is needed into our food manufacturing, marketing and distribution systems in order to deal with the problems inherent in new food technologies, especially as they affect poor people.

THE TURN OF THE CENTURY . THE TASTES OF AUSTRALIA
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LOW INCOME EARNERS AND FOOD

The issue of low income people and matters such as food, dietary and nutrition patterns needs to be discussed with great sensitivity. At all costs the trap of blaming victims should be avoided. Poor food and poor nutritional practices are not limited to the poor, for many structural factors favour poor eating habits and dietary patterns.

It is too easy to make statements like "the poor fill themselves with chips, coke and white bread"; "they are too lazy to cook and prefer to eat snacks in front of television"; or "they stuff their kids with sweets in order to keep them quiet". Even if there is factual basis to such statements, value judgments of that kind fail to ask the questions why low income people tend to have poorer diets, to smoke more heavily, to have more sedentary lifestyles leading to heart disease, than the rest of the population.

There are a number of key factors which tend to explain the problems low income people have in relation to diet and food.

1. Many lack basic cooking skills. Some, for example, who were raised in institutions, have never been taught how to cook. Others have failed to receive the benefit of necessary skills passed on from generation to generation due to family disruption and other factors.
2. Invariably, low income people cannot afford cooking utensils because the modern equipment on display in large stores far exceeds their price range. Frequently they are dependent upon battered old saucepans which do not allow nutrients to be retained in cooking.
3. Kitchens in most homes of poor families are inadequately equipped, uninviting and stoves are of very poor quality.
4. When families are under great stress, it is much easier to take a short cut and buy preprocessed food to satisfy demanding children.
5. Emotionally immature people generally tend towards activity which provides instant gratification and this applies quite directly to food intake.
6. Low income families who lack private vehicles only bring home what they can carry. They are therefore unable to buy in quantity, unable to purchase cheaply and do not have the means of shopping around to get things cheaply and at the best price. In any case, such a task involves considerable personal skills which many may not have been able to develop.
7. A television is the only form of entertainment most families can afford and usually they have few other choices. This means they are heavily involved in television watching and so the issue of advertising plays an important part in shaping perceptions on such matters as food. There has been a tendency over many years

for television advertisements to promote products which are fatty, sweet, salty, etc. which can undermine general health.

British research indicates that 80 per cent of children's pocket money in low income areas is spent on confectionery which has been advertised widely on television in conjunction with a storyline associated with a particular lifestyle.

8. When people are feeling depressed because they are unemployed, they are not much attracted to dull, wholesome food. Some words in George Orwell's classic, **The Road to Wigan Pier** are prophetic:

"When the dispute over the means test was in progress there was a disgusting public wrangle about the minimum weekly sum on which a human being could be kept alive the ordinary human being would sooner starve than live on brown bread and raw carrots. And the particular evil is this, that the less money you have, the less inclined you feel to spend it on wholesome food. A millionaire may enjoy breakfasting on orange juice and Rye Vita biscuits: an unemployed man doesn't when you are unemployed, which is to say when you are underfed, harrassed, bored and miserable, you don't want to eat dull wholesome food. You want something a little bit "tasty". There is always some cheaply pleasant thing to tempt you."

The expenditure priorities of low income people also need to be considered. In the B.S.L. research study **When the Pressure Is Really On**, Jenny Trethewey surveyed the income and expenditure patterns of a sample number of low income families over a six months' period.

The first priority was to pay the rent to ensure a roof over their heads. Many low income people spend between 45 and 60 per cent of their incomes on housing costs, which explains why there has been a substantial increase in the number of household units living in poverty after housing costs have been met.

The second priority was in paying energy bills. Apart from the humiliation of having electricity or gas disconnected there was the added problem of reconnection costs, not to mention the severe inconvenience caused.

The third was the telephone bill, which indicated that for low income people not able to move around a great deal, the telephone was a vital form of communication. (This could have been an added problem had the Commonwealth Government decided to meter calls in the way recently proposed.)

Food was the fourth and final priority. Families treated this as a discretionary cost which could be expanded or contracted in accordance with the amount of money available. Thus when there was an electricity bill to be paid, or a personal loan to be repaid, all members of the family tended to eat less, cutting down especially on fruit and vegetables. When this happened more filling foods like rice, pasta and bread were eaten; cheaper cuts of meat were purchased (if meat could be afforded); canned foods which had been stored previously were used; and finally they simply did without.

If serious attempts are to be made to improve the dietary and nutritional patterns of low income people, several problems first need to be addressed:

1. **Insufficiency of income.** There is no way that people can eat properly if their low level income cannot meet their expenditure needs or essential household costs. The recent Family Assistance Package is a first step in the right direction towards lifting families out of poverty. But further steps are needed in the next budget.

2. *Poor and insecure housing conditions are a grave problem and cause other destabilising factors. In particular families renting privately frequently find that the greater housing costs simply do not leave sufficient money to ensure proper food.*
3. *Many people simply lack the basic skills in buying and preparing food.*
4. *There is frequently a lack of patience over the preparation of food. This can be a vicious circle because low energy levels are a byproduct of poor nutrition.*
5. *People need a sufficient measure of inner strength and personal discrimination to resist being manipulated by television advertising.*
6. *Low income people need to have access to bulk buying outlets like food cooperatives to secure food at lower prices.*
7. *The exercise of discrimination, choice and processing appropriate food is related to people's desire for a better quality of life. Low income people also need to have a fair level of self esteem and a sense of wellbeing if this is to occur.*
8. *There must be a willingness to change entrenched habits. This is a particular problem with families where male heads are concerned. There are many examples where women have learnt new ways of preparing interesting and nutritious food, only to be rebuffed by men who want their usual meal, which usually contains unhealthy dietary elements.*
9. *It is clear that the health promotion strategies of the past decade have had an impact upon professional and middle income groups, but have not filtered down to people in low income groups.*

What is the way ahead? A multi-phased anti-poverty strategy needs to be mounted. Tragically there has been little interest in such matters since the Poverty Inquiry was completed in 1975. It has been effectively buried by successive governments. The Poverty Inquiry produced more information about the conditions of Australian people at the lower end of the income scale than any prior research this century. Much of that material now needs to be resurrected.

In particular, health services need to be examined. In the past the emphasis has been on the treatment of disease with too little attention being paid to the promotion of positive health. The establishment of Community Health Centres has meant that a greater emphasis has been placed on the promotion of health. Further resources are needed in order to develop more effective community outreach programmes.

There is an important issue in the area of consumer affairs with reference to television marketing and advertising controls. Governments need to persuade advertisers that they have some ethical responsibilities in the promotion of good healthy habits and sound nutritional patterns. These matters should be put to them initially with a strong request to regulate their advertisements, and failing this more stringent controls may be required.

There is a need for nutritional education and better public awareness. Efforts should be applied not only to reach poor people, but to tackle the food manufacturers to ensure better and more nutritional products are produced and more satisfactory methods of promotion are engaged.

More regular research is required. Apart from the National Heart Foundation survey in

1983, there has been no major household nutritional survey since the 1940s.

An important issue is that food needs to be given a higher value and not something which is prepared in domestic roles. Food has important impacts on the area of public health and the whole community needs to acknowledge that fact. There is a need for more analytical research into a range of matters including food manufacturing, marketing and distribution systems in order to deal with the problems that are now inherent in the new food technologies, especially as they affect the health of poor people.