

Changing what we eat: Can a professional association play a role?

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Professional associations have traditionally focused their activities in the provision of services to members. However, this need not be their only role. The Dietitians Association of Australia has chosen to take a proactive approach to changing the way that the Australian people eat. Through a variety of strategies assisted by partnerships with industry, the Association has been able to increase skills of individual members, provide skills to other health providers, increase advocacy, implement health promotion programs and use the media to provide nutrition messages. Encouraging results have been achieved to date that support such a role for professional associations.

Key words: dietary change, health promotion, professional associations, dietitians.

Introduction

To change a nation's diet is an enormous challenge. Strategies that can be used to encourage changes can be divided into one of two types: (i) those that attempt to change behaviour at the individual level through programmes specifically directed at either the whole population or a subgroup at risk within the population; and (ii) those that attempt to change behaviour through environmental and structural change.¹

The sociopolitical system within Australia is such that to use legislative powers to direct change is not a strategy of choice for achieving changes in eating patterns, but other strategies that focus on maintaining individual freedoms and rights within a supportive environment are more popular.² At present, forming partnerships between interested bodies is a strategy supported by both the government and non-government sectors, especially in an increasingly complex environment and with continuing resource constraints.³

The eating patterns within Australia are changing

There has been much change in the eating patterns of Australians. Indeed it could be argued that the national diet has changed extensively, especially over the past 50 years as evidenced by the change in the food supply and cuisines.⁴ Has this been the result of deliberate programmes to change the diet or by infusions of new foods and ideas, fuelled by the large postwar migrations of groups other than from an Anglo-Celtic background? Most would argue that the changes, while some have been positive, have not delivered the most desirable nutrient profile⁵ and that there is still much to be gained by improvement in the nation's diet. The national nutrition goals have yet to be met;⁶ there is an imperative for action.

Role of professional associations

Within this context, professional associations can play a key role. While some would argue that professional associations

should confine their activities to providing direct services to members, it can be argued that in the changing world of the 21st century, this role should change. Professional associations can act as lobby groups, as advocates and as awareness-raising groups. There are opportunities for inclusion of such bodies in the delivery of a range of public health interventions and in a climate of partnership. They can offer infrastructure, networks, skills and expertise, which can prove a rich resource.

It is within this context that the present paper argues that professional associations can have a real and vital role in changing the nation and, in this particular case, the diet of the nation.

Case study: Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA)

The Dietitians Association of Australia is the largest group representing nutrition professionals in Australia with a membership of 2000. Over the past decade it has been re-engineered as an organization, undergoing organizational redesign, building capacity and infrastructure and repositioning within the marketplace.

The President's Annual Report for 1990 focused on describing the activities of the Association and included descriptions of the meetings of the Board of Directors; the accreditation of particular dietetic programmes; issues on publications and conferences; output from committees and special interest groups; changes to procedures; work with other organizations; and the activities of the National Office.⁷ This report could be summarized as traditional and conservative.

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The President's Annual Report for 1998 focused outward on the commencement of partnerships with industry, future changes to memberships and interactions with a large number of external bodies.⁸ The report is shorter, does not describe the on-going or usual activities of the Association but is focused on the future.

A comparison of the objectives of the Association across the time interval demonstrates the changes in focus. Current objectives use supportive and inclusive terminology and express a broader, more positive approach; whereas those of a decade ago reflect an inward and narrow view. Table 1 compares the objectives of the Association in 1990 with those that are current.

This change of focus and direction has allowed other activities to receive attention. It has also enabled a different approach to financial management to be adopted, which has permitted the formation of partnerships. This proactive approach is attempting to increase public awareness of nutrition and nutrition professionals, and is also attempting, primarily, although not exclusively through its partnerships, to

deliver a variety of public health nutrition programmes and activities.

Examples of programmes and activities that support changing the diet of the nation

Example 1

Changing the diet of the nation through members' skills and abilities, not only at the individual level but also through the provision of expertise to government and non-government bodies. The introduction of a strong professional development programme ensures quality services and standards of practice for the nation. Increasing and improving professional development activities ultimately will lead to improved nutrition services. It is sustainable and will improve visibility.

Example 2

Changing the diet of the nation by upskilling other health providers. This will shortly increase with the commencement

Table 1. Comparison of the current objectives of the Dietitians Association of Australia with those of 1990

Current objectives of DAA	Aims and objectives of DAA (1990)
1 Represent, promote and advance nutrition and the profession of dietetics in Australia	To promote the professional practice of dietetics To foster and develop dietetics in Australia
2 Advise on suitable courses for the training of dietitians and accreditation of nutrition and dietetic courses	To advise on suitable courses for the training of dietitians and to give accreditation to the qualifications of dietitians
3 Participate in the formation and continuing revision of education standards for eligibility to practise and to continue to practise as dietitian	To improve standards for the educational and scientific qualifications of dietetics and students in dietetics
4 Recognize relevant entry level competencies and overseas qualifications	
5 Promote excellence in practice through a programme of continuing professional development	To improve the practical and theoretical knowledge of dietitians through lectures, experiments, demonstrations and postgraduate courses
6 Support current government legislation pertaining to government registration	To acquire, in the interest of the public and all members, knowledge of proposed or enacted Australian and overseas legislation in any way relating to the practice of dietetics and that affects or could affect that practice
7 Support ethical practice	
8 Promote nutrition education for health professionals and others	
9 Promote improved nutrition knowledge, skills and behaviour of all Australians	To improve the nutritional knowledge of the community
10 Promote nutrition and dietetics through advocacy in government and non-government sectors	To collect, compile and distribute amongst the public and among members information on matters pertaining to the practice of dietetics
11 Advocate, initiate, promote, support or oppose legislation or other measures or proceedings as may seem expedient for achieving the objectives of the Association	To initiate, promote, support or oppose legislation or other measures or proceedings as may seem expedient for achieving any of the objects of the Association
12 Represent the membership on matters relating to food, nutrition and dietetics at international organizations and to federal, state and local governments and to any other organizations or agencies	To represent dietitians on matters involving the practice of dietetics in discussions with international organizations, federal, state and local governments and any instrumentalities thereof.
13 Foster the profession and practice of nutrition and dietetic internationally	To take over and acquire all the assets, undertakings, rights and liabilities of the unincorporated body known as 'the Australian Dietetic Council'
14	To promote efficiency in dietetics

Sources: Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) Annual Report 1990,⁷ 1998.⁸

of a programme to provide family medicine professionals with information and resources that are directly relevant to them. By providing education programmes for a number of health professional groups it is hoped to reinforce nutrition messages.

Example 3

Changing the diet of the nation through advocacy. It has proved critical to maintain nutrition and nutrition-related issues on the agenda of the government and before the media. Nutrition is not reimbursed through the Medicare levy, leaving thousands of Australians with nutrition-related problems to fund their own care. Responding to calls for community and specialist input into a variety of topical issues is critical to building a successful national food supply. DAA members are 'knowledge workers' who work at the consumer/food system interface. As such, they are in touch with issues and concerns facing the public and can interpret these concerns to decision makers.

Example 4

Implementing public health nutrition strategies, including reinforcing the dietary guidelines messages especially increasing consumption of fruit and vegetables, breads and cereals, variety and weight management. These programmes are sustainable and on-going, leading to an increased likelihood of adoption of modified behaviours (see Appendix).

Example 5

Promoting general nutrition messages — breakfast for young women, community messages increasing awareness of nutrition professionals (see Appendix).

Countering misinformation in the press and other media. A very wide programme of training spokespersons, media watching and proactive approach to counter misinformation has resulted in a large increase in the number of times that the Association has received media coverage (see Appendix).

How are these activities funded?

DAA commenced a programme of forming strategic partnerships with key industry allies early in 1999. These partnerships have proven to be crucial in delivering the nutrition messages that are valid, pertinent and which coincide with DAA or national interests.

Evaluation of outcomes

The programmes that DAA has commenced are varied in nature. Some are short-term, while others include the hallmarks of successful public health interventions; namely, that they are well planned, are repeated and are sustainable. It is hoped that the outcome of these programmes will be change in the nation's diet, more positive outcomes for the nutrition professions, and nutrition being returned to a prominent place on the national agenda. All DAA programmes are evaluated, as this is part of the brief to conduct the business for members in the most efficacious manner possible. A recent survey of members (DAA membership survey November

1999) found the overwhelming majority supported the partnership programme and felt that it delivered positive benefits to themselves as members as well as to the population more generally.

In June and November of 1999, the DAA carried out a Newspoll survey to evaluate unprompted awareness of DAA as a source of authoritative information on nutrition and lifestyle among the general public. The results showed that unprompted awareness of DAA significantly increased in the six month period and that prompted awareness of DAA as a source of information on nutrition and lifestyle was 35.5%. This was higher than some other organizations commonly quoted on nutrition issues in the media in Australia.

It is hoped that the increase in coverage of nutrition issues through the media, and the adherence to scientifically substantiated messages will lead, in the longer term, to greater awareness of nutrition among the population. Coupled with practical tips on implementation and the use of multiple strategies, it is hoped that behaviour change will follow with the ultimate goal being a changed diet across the nation. Together with other groups and individuals within society, it is hoped that the long-term goal of improved diet will be met.

Conclusion

The case study presented here supports the view that a professional association can make a difference to the diet of a nation if it takes a strategic approach. Programmes implemented by DAA through its partnership programmes deliver high-quality sustainable programmes and reach a wide audience. Preliminary evaluation suggests that awareness has been raised. If professional associations did not take a leadership role in some areas of public health, the outcome for the nation would be significantly worse in a climate of resource constraint and reduced public sector funding.

Acknowledgements. Thanks to the members and staff of DAA and industry partners who support its on-going and developing activities. Thanks to Jan Payne for reviewing the manuscript.

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Appendix

Examples of partnership programmes designed to change the diet of the nation

What is 7-a-day?

7-a-day is all about eating better and living better. Coles, in partnership with the Dietitians Association of Australia, has developed the 7-a-day programme to encourage all Australians to eat 7 serves of fruit and vegetables a day. Just a few extra serves each day can make a big difference to overall health and well being.

<http://www.7aday.coles.myer.com.au/>

The programme includes advertising, public relations, an internet site, point of sale information in Coles stores and communications with Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) members and other parts of the health and nutrition sector. DAA advises on the scientific and nutrition communications aspects of the programme, and DAA members are programme spokespeople.

The DAA Spokespersons' Programme

This partnership further progresses DAA's goals of communicating accurate nutrition messages to the community and increasing the profile of DAA and members' expertise. The programme includes support for DAA spokespersons' media training, and development of community service announcements (television) and nutrition columns. The DAA Spokespersons' Programme functions in conjunction with the DAA Media Programme.

This programme provides excellent opportunities for DAA to deliver accurate nutrition messages to the community via mass media.

The importance of breakfast

Short video clip produced showing a young woman 'booting up' by eating breakfast.

The target group is 18–29-year-old women, in which there has been a significant decline in eating breakfast. Objective is to support the message that breakfast is important. Community service announcement supported by the Australian Dairy Corporation.

The DAA Media Programme

The implementation and management of DAA's media programme and the work of the DAA Public Relations Officer forms the DAA Media Programme. This programme allows DAA to better inform consumers about nutrition and raise the profile of the Association, DAA members and their expertise. The DAA Media Programme works in conjunction with the DAA Spokespersons' Programme.

Kellogg's also assists DAA by providing a media monitoring service, which enables DAA to respond quickly to media stories as they arise.