

Family studies in nutrition at Monash Medical School

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Diet, lifestyle and health status are inextricably linked. As potential advisers for the community regarding health related matters, it is vital that medical undergraduates become equipped with a thorough understanding of nutrition, including its science, theories and practice. Yet, in a modern consumer based society such as exists in Australia today, this field is inherently complex. A body of knowledge is constantly expanding and guidelines being refined. However, regardless of any beliefs about what might constitute an optimal diet, people are influenced by far more than this in their consumption of foodstuffs. Culture, tradition and habit exert strong influences. Consumers are continually exposed to the mass media and hence the disparate and fragmented information despatched by competing commercial interests. To have no understanding of these broader areas is essentially to restrict greatly the framework within which one may practise clinical medicine.

With this in mind, the medical faculty of Monash University in Melbourne is seeking to integrate nutrition within the training in biomedical and psychosocial sciences which students receive. Specific studies in nutrition commence in the second year of a six year course, but are built upon as the course continues.

As part of a general, ongoing study of a chosen nuclear family, each second year medical student was required to assess the overall nutritional status of family members. Some students later extended this to consider two specific areas related to dietary consumption. It was interesting to note the recurring themes which arose in the essays, such as the predominant role of the mother in the overall family diet, the influence of the media and the extraordinary diversity of ethnicity (and correspondingly, food related behaviour) within a relatively restricted geographical area. (The studies were undertaken in the large city of Melbourne).

Two essay topics follow as examples of these themes.
