

Foodservice – a critical tool to prevent and fight chronic disease

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March 2020

Foodservice usually refers to any meal and beverage preparation outside the home. It incorporates businesses, and industries that support those businesses, which provide ingredients or whole meals in a variety of contexts including schools, hospitals, cafes restaurants, cafeterias and aged care settings, but does not usually include supermarkets. Globally the foodservice market was valued at [\\$US TR 3.4 in 2018](#) with an expected continued growth rate of 5.1% year on year to 2023 in [Australia](#). Foodservice is a key component of the Australian economy, employing more than 2 million people prior to the pandemic. Despite the global pandemic, these projections are probably still valid as the sector will continue to grow once the economy recovers.

Australians have demonstrated an increase in eating away from home, and for purchasing and using “convenience” [foods of all varieties](#). As far back as 1992, the Commonwealth government published its first [Food and Nutrition Policy](#), which included the following summary “effective food and nutrition policy requires food producers to increase their skills related to knowledge of dietary issues and apply these to product development; food marketers to understand nutrition issues and consumer perceptions.” One of the strategies identified to meet objectives was “public and private food services (including school canteens), food manufacturing companies and all levels of government will be encouraged to adopt nutrition policies; health services and the food industry should lead by example”. This policy has not been updated or changed since its publication and is as salient today as then. But this is not to deny the substantial leaps that the food industry and the food service industry has made since then, with improvements in nutrient profiles and reformulation of foods to reduce sodium, free sugars and saturated fats.

Despite these gains, we have seen only some gains in overall health. Chronic disease continues to increase and be an issue, even though the age profile of some of these diseases has changed. Obesity is on the rise, and with it, its outcome of diabetes in a proportion of the obese. So the role of the foodservices sector has, if anything, become more important than ever. The leading trend in the foodservice sector identified in 2018 was an increased [demand for healthier food](#). The dilemma is that while there have been enormous gains in the number of healthier options being produced, the types of fat used, the reduction of free sugars in foods and beverages for example, there is also an increase in inappropriate activities at the point of service, [for example in terms of serve sizes](#). With more than 50 million meals being served per year by the sector, there is a real opportunity and imperative for the sector to be involved in any chronic disease reduction processes.

It is also the case that nutrition issues vary according to the population segment of interest. One size does not fit all. The frail elderly are quite different to the well younger adult or children. The fit are different to the unfit of any size and the obese have different nutrition needs compared to the non-obese. Children are in a separate group. Those with chronic disease already require a different focus to prevent the chronic disease from getting worse. It is impossible therefore, to make global statements such as “reduce total saturated fat” “reduce free sugars” as these messages are directed at younger adults and children. They do not relate to the over 70’s. Foodservice needs to differentiate among different target groups to make an impact.

The calls for foodservice to engage and offer solutions rather than being a cause of chronic diseases continue. As recently as [April, 2020](#) calls for chain restaurants to engage in addressing obesity have been made. Research continues as to how best to effect change, for example, [reducing the price of vegetables](#) to increase purchase. [Changing procurement policy](#) away from less desirable foods has also been shown to be effective.

Similarly, in the health and aged care sectors there is a need for clear policy and engagement. In these settings the primary chronic diseases are malnutrition and unintended weight loss, with the aged care sector also facing chronic mental health conditions related to loss of autonomy. These are very much food and nutrition related but differ considerably from the focus on obesity, diabetes, cancer and heart disease that relate to other community sectors. This adds to the complexity of the sector. It also highlights how difficult the issues are for foodservice and that there is a real need for segmentation, similar to that found [overseas](#).

While the role of foodservice in chronic disease development and amelioration has been understood for decades, leading to policy and practice to improve and change the meals and ingredients the industry provides, changes in the population, especially increased life expectancy, have made the issues more complex. Success has not always followed even when strategies for improvement have been enacted. The industry needs to increase its expertise in segmentation, and increase research to understand barriers and enablers to change. When science underpins practice, the likelihood of success is increased. Foodservice will not continue to be merely a key tool for chronic disease prevention and management, but will become the main tool in sectors such as food provision for the elderly who can no longer prepare their own meals. The impact of foodservice on health is critical to the nation.

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S M Capra Foodservice – a critical tool to prevent and fight chronic disease
Nutrition and Catering Institute Education Resource March 2020
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