

1 The national context

This chapter presents an overview of Australia and its food and nutrition system. The specific issues it identifies are considered in detail in later chapters.

1.1 The people and the land

The people of Australia

Australian society generally is provided with an abundant, safe and affordable food supply that has developed to incorporate an increasing diversity of experiences and tastes. In general, literacy levels are high and Australians have good access to health and nutrition information and education and so have the opportunity to make informed food choices. Levels of infant mortality are generally low, life expectancy is generally high, and Australia ranks among the healthiest countries in the world.^{1,2}

The first migrants to Australia arrived more than 40 000 years ago and it is reported that 'by 20 000 years ago almost the entire continent was inhabited'.³ The Tasmanian population was isolated by rising sea levels from about 12 000 years ago until Europeans arrived.³ The population of Australia just before European contact has been estimated to be between 250 000 and 750 000;^{4,5,6} there may have been more than 500 different cultural groups, most of which were hunter-gatherer societies.

Permanent European settlements were established about 200 years ago. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures were disrupted as European settlement spread, and some language groups disappeared.³ Migrants in the nineteenth century were primarily of British and Irish origin; exceptions were German Lutherans to South Australia from the 1820s, Chinese to the goldfields in the 1850s, and 62 000 Pacific Islanders to the Queensland canefields between 1863 and 1904.⁷ The European population reached 3 million in the first 100 years³ and 16.5 million in the next 100 years.⁸ The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (approximately 228 000 people) now comprises about 1.5 per cent of the total Australian population.⁹

The ethnic diversity of migrants to Australia increased after World War II, although British migrants remained the most numerous.⁸ The numbers of other European settlers increased particularly between 1947 and the early 1970s, many of these settlers were persons displaced by the war in Europe followed by southern European migrants.⁷ Since the mid-1970s immigration from Europe has slowed, although this has been offset partly by a rise in immigration from New Zealand.⁸ Immigration from the Middle East and Asia has increased markedly as a proportion of the total migrant intake since the 1970s, and there has also been significant immigration from South and Central America.⁷ Refugee arrivals have averaged about 11 000 annually in the last 20 years, with a peak in the early 1980s.⁸ The origins of immigrants in recent years have tended to be areas of political unrest or war, such as the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia and Iraq.¹⁰ The present population of Australia is multicultural in nature, and in recent years the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and heritage has been more widely acknowledged.

The increasing cultural diversity of the Australian population has changed the food habits and lifestyle of Australians. Irrespective of food preferences, migrants' food

habits necessarily change, for several reasons: unavailability of traditional foods; changed economic circumstances; and the social requirements of the predominant culture.¹¹

The increasing consumer demand for variety—of foods, eating habits and social patterns—has also expanded the range of foods eaten in Australia and in turn influenced the nutritional status and ultimately the health of the Australian people.

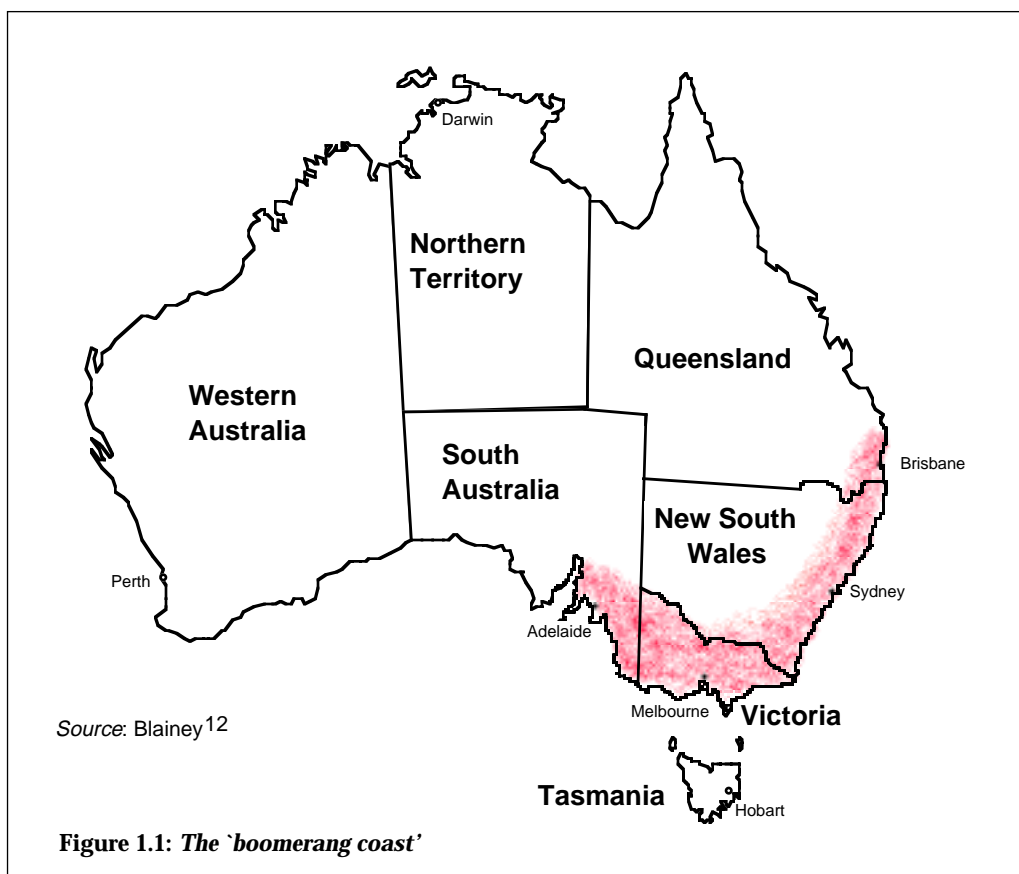
The ‘tyranny of distance’

In *The tyranny of distance*, Blainey¹² considers two distance factors that have influenced the shaping of Australia: distance from traditional markets (that is, Europe); and the difficulties posed by the country’s size and the inaccessibility of its interior. Blainey did not apply his argument to pre-European Australians, but they too were influenced by the nature of Australia. The arid interior, for example, could support hunter-gatherer societies but was unsuitable for agriculture. Trade with Europe was obviously not an issue, but it has been suggested that distance and aridity were important factors encouraging the cultural isolation and linguistic diversity of Aboriginal societies.^{3,4}

From the time of European settlement the size of Australia and the inaccessibility of its interior led to a concentration of people and infrastructure in the south-east of the country—Blainey’s ‘boomerang coast’, a strip of land approximately 320 kilometres wide from Brisbane to Adelaide (Figure 1.1). This pattern has continued. Australia has a land area of about 7.7 million square kilometres and in 1991 had a population of 17.3 million.^{8,13} Settlement away from the ‘boomerang coast’ is sparse. The rural population (about 14 per cent of the total, or less than 3 million people) is scattered over 7 million square kilometres and 9 million Australians (53 per cent of the population) live in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide. Industrial and commercial activity is concentrated in the densely populated coastal areas.

Distance from Europe and changes in patterns of international trade have also influenced Australia’s perspective. Britain’s move into the European Community meant an end to Australia’s favoured trading status and accelerated the post-war change in emphasis towards Asian markets.¹⁴ This has influenced modern Australia and its food. The relatively small domestic market requires the rural sector to be export oriented and Australia’s agricultural enterprises are concentrated in the major export industries of sheep, cattle and grain production.

The ‘tyranny of distance’ for today’s rural Australians arises from the twin aspects of isolation (remoteness from sources of goods and services) and dilution (low population density and large area). Isolation increases the expense of providing facilities to rural areas; for example, the Kimberley region of Western Australia is about 2000 kilometres from its distribution centre, Perth, and local food retail prices are influenced markedly by transport costs.^{15,16} The commercial viability of food production in remote areas is also affected by higher input costs and reduced ease of access to the chief markets of urban Australia.



Public sector services such as health, education and welfare are also less accessible than in urban areas.¹⁷ Traditionally, rural communities have accepted the deficiencies in facilities and services and the consequences are reflected, for example, not only in differences in use of health services but also in differences in health status.¹⁷⁻²²

Low population density raises the cost of providing facilities relative to costs in dense urban areas. For example, in Adelaide during 1982 average turnover in groceries, toiletries and confectionery for 340 metropolitan grocery stores was \$1.3 million per store, compared with an average of \$0.4 million per store for 366 non-metropolitan stores. Even in Victoria, the most densely populated State, 1206 metropolitan Melbourne outlets averaged \$1.1 million per shop, compared with \$0.7 million per shop in the rest of Victoria.²³

Social isolation also influences the patterns of Australian life. The effects are most severe for population subgroups with special needs, such as migrants of non-English-speaking background, who are under-represented outside the 'boomerang coast',^{24,25} McCallum and Shadbolt found that communication was a key factor in the higher levels of psychological distress among older migrants of non-English-speaking origin compared with older Australians for whom English was the first language.²⁶

The dearth of own-language services outside urban areas increases the importance of family and community support.

For historical reasons Aboriginal Australians are over-represented in rural areas, particularly areas distant from the 'boomerang coast'. They constitute 22 per cent of the Northern Territory population,⁸ with 69 per cent living in rural communities.⁹ In comparison with all Australians, a greater proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live in rural communities (33 per cent compared with 14 per cent) and a smaller proportion in major urban centres (24 per cent compared with 63 per cent).^{8,9}

Climate

Sixty-one per cent of the continent lies in the temperate zone and 39 per cent in the tropics. It is the hottest continent in terms of periods of sustained high temperatures. With the exception of the alpine areas of the south-east corner of the mainland and the west of Tasmania, persistent snow or severe frosts are rare and extreme minimum temperatures are mild compared with other continents.¹³

Australia also has the lowest rainfall of any continent: the average annual rainfall is approximately 420 millimetres.²⁷ The highest rainfall occurs along the tropical portion of the east coast, but only 11 per cent of the land area has a median annual rainfall of over 800 millimetres. Most of inland Australia is arid or semi-arid: 30 per cent of the land area receives less than 200 millimetres annual rainfall and is classified as arid; median annual rainfall is less than 300 millimetres over 50 per cent of the continent. Almost three-quarters of South Australia—that is, 730 000 square kilometres, an area approximately three times the size of the United Kingdom or New Zealand—is arid.¹³ Table 1.1 shows median annual rainfall distribution across Australia.

Table 1.1: Area distribution of median annual rainfall (per cent)

Median annual rainfall	NSW ^(a)	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	NT	Aust
Under 200 mm	8.0	–	10.2	43.5	74.2	–	15.5	29.6
200 to 300 mm	20.3	6.3	13.0	29.6	13.5	–	35.6	22.9
300 to 400 mm	19.0	19.2	12.3	10.5	6.8	–	9.0	11.2
400 to 500 mm	12.4	11.8	13.5	4.3	3.2	–	6.6	7.6
500 to 600 mm	11.3	14.1	11.6	3.1	1.8	12.2	5.8	6.6
600 to 800 mm	15.1	24.5	20.5	4.6	0.5	18.2	11.6	10.7
800 to 1200 mm	11.3	17.7	12.6	3.7	–	25.0	9.6	7.7
Above 1200 mm	2.6	6.4	6.3	0.7	–	44.6	6.3	3.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

– Zero

(a) Includes Australian Capital Territory

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics¹³

With the exception of the southern coast and the east coast to north of Townsville (approximately 19°S), rainfall is highly variable from year to year. Variability increases with increasing aridity, so that most of inland Australia has high to extreme rainfall variability coupled with high but variable mean temperatures. Rainfall variability in eastern and northern Australia is largely a result of the El Niño—Southern Oscillation phenomenon, which arises from anomalous large-scale differences in atmospheric pressure in the southern Pacific region. El Niño episodes manifest as a warming of the

sea surface in the eastern equatorial Pacific accompanied by unusually frequent high pressure systems over northern Australia; they occur at intervals of about two to seven years, causing a decrease in rainfall. La Niña episodes (cooler sea surface and unusually frequent low pressure systems) have the opposite effect. In El Niño years about 63 per cent of eastern Australia has below average rainfall and 6 per cent has above average rainfall; in La Niña years, about 3 per cent has below average rainfall and 71 per cent has above average rainfall.^{27,28}

Australia's climatic conditions restrict cropping to about half the year in inland areas and restrict cultivation of some crops to limited regions with appropriate local climates. Floods and droughts (and bushfires) are persistent features in Australian agriculture. The variability of rainfall increases the risk of overstocking in La Niña years. When this has occurred in the past, particularly in semi-arid areas, it has led to overgrazing in subsequent El Niño years, with soil erosion, species changes, and consequent land degradation.²⁷

Soil and water resources

Australia's soils fall into seven broad groups. Arid zone soils (for example, in the Simpson Desert) and coastal sands are little used. Sandy soils such as in the Mallee district (the area surrounding the junction of the South Australian, Victorian and New South Wales borders) are used for grazing and broadacre cropping. Red and yellow earths in both tropical and temperate areas are used for grazing, as are the cracking clays of the Mitchell grass plains in north-western Queensland. In the Victorian Wimmera and in New South Wales from the Hay plain (700 kilometres south-west of Sydney) north to Walgett (580 kilometres north-west of Sydney) the cracking clay soils are used for wheat-growing. The Western Australian 'wheat belt', which covers much of the western temperate part of the State, is made up of duplex soils and some areas of sandy soil. Alluvial floodplain soils and the friable earths of the Atherton Tableland in northern Queensland, the Lismore district of northern New South Wales, the area around Devonport in Tasmania and parts of Gippsland in Victoria are fertile, workable soils used for high-value crops such as sugar, vegetables and fruits.²⁹

The major problem is not soil quality per se, but degradation, particularly of the most fertile soils. Government recognition of the problems of erosion and degradation³⁰ has resulted in increased awareness and efforts to reduce these problems. Two major causes of degradation are inappropriate use of fertilisers and 'downstream' effects, where the actions of some operators disadvantage others.³¹ The Landcare program, which was introduced in Western Australia in 1983, is one of several Commonwealth initiatives to promote sustainable land use and to deal with land degradation problems.³²

Salinity is another serious problem affecting land use. The arid and semi-arid inland of Australia has about 300 000 square kilometres of naturally occurring saline areas, the result of saline groundwaters or naturally saline subsoils. Secondary salinity of soil and water as a consequence of human activity is increasing, particularly dry land salinity in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia.³³

Lack of rainfall is 'the most important single factor determining land use and rural production in Australia'.³⁴ Early settlements were established on the basis of reliable

water supplies so that most of the population became concentrated along the coast, mainly in the well-watered east, south-east and south-west.

Inland Australia relies on irrigation and underground water resources because of the low and variable rainfall and high evaporation rates. The spread of settlement inland was highly dependent on artesian water which is the major source throughout the arid and semi-arid inland although technological constraints limit its use to only 15 per cent of the estimated supply.³⁵ The most important underground water resource is the Great Artesian Basin.

Australia has a mean annual run-off of about 440 teralitres (440 cubic kilometres), of which about one-quarter could be used.³⁴ Mean annual use of run-off water, however, is estimated at only 14.6 teralitres (3 per cent), of which 10.2 teralitres (70 per cent) are used for irrigation; half of all water use is for irrigation in the Murray–Darling Basin, and irrigation is used to produce around 20 per cent of annual farm output from an area of 15 000 square kilometres.³⁶

Management of water resources has been primarily a State or local government responsibility. The Australian Water and Wastewater Association lists 49 water authorities.³⁷ The National Water Quality Management Strategy, launched in August 1992, aims to coordinate action to manage water resources as part of the process of sustainable development.³⁸

Similarly, marine environments are administered by numerous authorities. Fish nursery habitats are particularly at risk from pollution and damage. The main problems come from sewage, industrial effluents, and fertiliser and pesticide run-off.^{39,40}

Land and water resource management are dominant issues in current industry and government thinking about sustainable development of primary industry. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has noted that the area of available arable land is decreasing as a result of land degradation and urban expansion, and water quality is an increasing concern.³⁹ This has importance for food production and nutrition.

Land use

Table 1.2 shows land use patterns across Australia. About 60 per cent of the land (approximately 4.7 million square kilometres) is used for cattle or sheep grazing or sown to pasture and grasses. Only some 17 000 to 20 000 square kilometres (3 to 4 per cent of all agricultural establishments) are used for crop production. The area used for horticulture is a relatively small proportion of land used for crops. Residential land occupies little space but tends to be in potentially fertile and productive areas. The balance of the land is unsuitable for agriculture; some of it is dedicated to national parks, conservation zones and recreational activities.

The area of land used for agriculture decreased by 21 500 square kilometres (4.4 per cent) between 1983–84 and 1989–90,⁴¹ and at least some of the decrease can be attributed to degradation.³⁹ At the same time, however, there was an increase of about 15 per cent in farm output during the 1980s. Factors contributing to increased productivity were higher capital investment in agriculture, better training, improved technology, and increased understanding of land management.⁴¹

Table 1.2: Land utilisation in Australia, 1983–84 to 1989–90 ('000 km²)

Year	Total area under agriculture	% of total land mass	Area used for crops ^(a)	% of total agricultural land	Land for grazing pasture ^(b)	% of total agricultural land
1983–84	4886	63.6	220	4.5	4405	95.5
1984–85	4880	63.5	211	4.3	4398	95.7
1985–86	4683	61.0	206	4.4	4213	95.6
1986–87	4710	61.3	198	4.2	4239	95.8
1987–88	4720	61.4	184	3.9	4250	96.1
1988–89	4669	60.8	175	3.7	4192	96.3
1989–90	4666	60.7	170	3.6	4187	96.4

(a) Includes land used for horticulture

(b) Includes land under active grazing, sown with pastures and grasses, or lying idle or fallow

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics⁴¹

1.2 The policy environment

Australian federalism is government with the added special ingredient: politics with extra vitamins. Of course, some vitamins are good for you, while others ... in excess, are bad for you.⁴²

Public policy is the framework within which governments make decisions in a consistent manner and in the perceived best interests of society as a whole. Policy is generally formulated in response to an identified problem that generates economic, social or political pressure. Developing national policy requires a balance between the different constituencies and their needs, priorities and values.⁴³ The policy process in Australia is also influenced by relationships between local, State and federal governments.

The federal system

The federal system that came into being in Australia on 1 January 1901 was preceded by over 40 years of self-government in five of the six colonies, all of which had developed strong individual traditions of government.⁴⁴ Since 1901 Australia has developed a system of government characterised by State autonomy, bicameralism, and entrenched constitutions. The policy environment has been shaped by tensions between the State governments and the Commonwealth Government—tensions generated by constitutional limits on Commonwealth policy initiatives and Commonwealth financial control. The Commonwealth is usually involved with ways and means, and the States control rules and regulations and organisational infrastructure for services. There have been changes in the balance between the Commonwealth Government and the State governments to accommodate changing social and structural concerns and, despite the potential for conflicts of interest and control, Commonwealth–State relationships have been more cooperative than otherwise. The balance between policy-making and finance and between resource allocation and service provision has worked. An example is the harmonisation of food standards across Australia. The Commonwealth has taken responsibility for the development of the National Food Standards Code, which is ratified by a joint

State–Commonwealth Ministerial Council, and then enacted into law by State governments. State food laws, which preceded the Food Standards Code, covered food composition and preparation and the way in which food may be presented to consumers and differed between States.

Recent changes in the operations of the Commonwealth Government have the potential to affect Commonwealth–State relationships. Among these changes is a growing tendency towards an executive style of parliamentary government,⁴⁴ whereby Cabinet becomes the place ‘where the really important decisions are made’.⁴² Another change is the departure from the one department, one minister tradition that had been in operation from 1901 to 1987.⁴⁵

The bicameral nature of the Federal Parliament also influences the relationship. In the last 20 years the Senate has become more influential in its role as the States’ House and as the House of review of government legislation.⁴⁴

Local government

The third tier of government in Australia has direct relationships with both the Commonwealth and State government. Responsibility for local government at the federal level moved in 1993 to the expanded Department of Health, Housing, Local Government and Community Services. Local government has generally seen the move as positive because it brings Commonwealth involvement in local government affairs into an area that corresponds with the priorities of local governments and the way in which they relate to their communities.

Before the portfolio move, the federal objective for local government was to improve ‘the social and economic wellbeing of local communities by assisting local government to achieve national objectives’.⁴⁶ Implementation strategies were to provide opportunities for local government to participate in national policy development, to support integrated social, economic and physical planning, and otherwise to facilitate the implementation of Commonwealth policy goals at the local level.⁴⁶ Transfer to the portfolio dealing with community services can assist in meeting that objective. This view is held by the peak national representative body, the Australian Local Government Association. An important element in intergovernmental relations is the participation of the Association on several ministerial councils; this is seen to be a prime means of coordinating policies and translating them into action at the community level.

Local governments participate in a range of formal and informal alliances, ranging from the Australian Local Government Association and State municipal government associations to regional cooperation in areas of common interest. Regional groups may formalise their relationship; for example, regional organisations of councils, established with funding and support from the Commonwealth as part of the Whitlam Government’s (1972–75) initiatives.⁴⁷ Although the funding was withdrawn in 1976 when Fraser succeeded Whitlam as Prime Minister,⁴⁷ 440 of approximately 900 councils in existence in 1993 are members of regional groups representing 60 per cent of Australia’s population. These are often strategic groups whose common interests and problems enable them to benefit from resource sharing and economies of scale in bidding for funds and contracting for services.

Local government is regulated by State government legislation, but local councils act independently within the regulatory framework. Consequently, the relationship between local and State governments is analogous to the Commonwealth–State relationship: State governments set a policy context and provide resources, and local governments provide services and infrastructure. At the same time, local governments develop and seek to implement local policies based on the perceived needs of the particular communities. The relationship is dynamic and complicated by changes such as the regionalisation of services in some States.

Dietary Guidelines for Australians and reference data

First developed in 1981,⁴⁸ the Dietary Guidelines for Australians were revised in 1992 by the NHMRC Panel to Review the Dietary Guidelines.⁴⁹ The notable change was the addition of Guidelines on specific nutrients (iron and calcium). Table 1.3 shows the original and the revised Guidelines. The Guidelines provide a basis for evaluating dietary intake and for informing Australians about nutritious food choices. It is inappropriate to take individual Guidelines in isolation or to apply them to individual food items: the Guidelines apply to the total diet and are designed for use as ‘a coherent set of advice or information’.⁴⁹

The Commonwealth Government has also been responsible for promoting the development of nutrition reference data suitable for use in developing policy and as tools for policy implementation and assessment. These have been developed primarily through the mechanism of the NHMRC Nutrition Committee (now reconstituted as the Food and Health Committee).

The main nutrition references are the tables of acceptable weights-for-height (and definitions for overweight and obesity based on body mass index), recommended dietary intakes for use in Australia, references for growth of Australian children, the Australian Nutrient Data Bank and published food composition data, the Australian Food Standards Code and the ‘Model Food Act’, and national food and nutrition goals and targets.

Table 1.3: Dietary Guidelines for Australians, 1981 and 1992

1992 revised	1981
1. Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious foods.	2. Choose a nutritious diet from a variety of foods.
2. Eat plenty of breads and cereals (preferably wholegrain), vegetables (including legumes) and fruits.	6. Eat more breads and cereals (preferably wholegrain) and vegetables and fruits.
3. Eat a diet low in fat and, in particular, low in saturated fat.	4. Avoid eating too much fat.
4. Maintain a healthy body weight by balancing physical activity and food intake.	3. Control your weight.
5. If you drink alcohol, limit your intake.	7. Limit alcohol consumption.
6. Eat only a moderate amount of sugars and foods containing added sugars.	5. Avoid eating too much sugar.
7. Choose low salt foods and use salt sparingly.	8. Use less salt.
8. Encourage and support breastfeeding.	1. Promote breastfeeding.
Guidelines on specific nutrients	
1. Eat foods containing calcium. This is particularly important for girls and women.	
2. Eat foods containing iron. This applies particularly to girls, women, vegetarians and athletes.	

Sources: NHMRC;⁴⁹ Commonwealth Department of Health⁵⁰

Health issues

Financial allocations

Australia supports the World Health Organization (WHO) goal of Health for All by the Year 2000, and implementation strategies include the National Health Promotion Program, the National Better Health Program (1989–92) and the National Health Advancement Program (from 1993).⁵¹ Despite these important initiatives, the health portfolio is highly concentrated on medical and hospital services, which account for a large proportion of expenditure. In 1991–92 expenditure under Medicare (for private medical practice and hospital grants) was \$8340 million.⁵¹ The total 1991–92 expenditure for health care access (including Medicare) was \$10 181 million. This compares with \$196 million allocated to the Health Advancement Program, \$21.2 million allocated to health promotion, and \$49.1 million spent on HIV prevention.⁵²

National health policy issues

In 1990 the Commonwealth Government commissioned a major strategic review of health—the National Health Strategy; by June 1993, 21 reports on various aspects of health had been published. Although most reports deal with health care access and delivery, one report discusses health promotion issues, including nutrition.⁵³

It recommends consideration of a legislative basis for health promotion and support for intersectoral action (including the establishment of a national body to direct such action) and broadly endorses the principles of the Ottawa Charter. It also considers a health promotion role for general medical practitioners and an expansion of health promotion to other aspects of health care, beyond what is 'formally designated as health promotion'.⁵³

A greater involvement by general practitioners in health promotion and disease prevention is acknowledged by the profession itself, as well as government and strategies to achieve this are already in operation.^{51,54}

Recommendations for revised national health goals and targets were released in February 1993.⁵⁵ These have not been adopted, but the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council agreed that action under the National Health Advancement Program should focus on four areas identified in the recommendations, but this was not to the exclusion of other areas, such as nutrition.

Recommendations for food and nutrition were selected from those of a workshop to consider nutrition goals and targets, held in January 1992.⁵⁶ There were 26 goals, although targets could not be established for all (see Appendix D).

A working party was established in 1987 to report on a National Aboriginal Health Strategy, which it did in 1989.⁵⁷ Responsibility for guiding the implementation rests with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. The report identified a nutrition component that also has relevance for social policies.

Cross-program links

With health and community service functions coming within the same Commonwealth department from 1987 (to which housing was added in 1991 and local government in 1993), the opportunity was taken to develop a cross-program and regional focus. It was designed to accommodate community needs that required the involvement of more than one program and the needs of those in small or isolated communities.⁵² This focus will obviously have benefits for the implementation of an integrated food and nutrition policy: the striking feature of nutrition issues is their multifactorial nature, and the best nutrition interventions are intersectoral, multiple strategy, community based and socially oriented.^{58,59}

Besides the National Health Strategy, in 1990 the Commonwealth Government commissioned two other strategic reviews—a review of the National Housing Strategy and the Mid Term Review of Aged Care. The outcome was the endorsement of national policies,^{51,60} both of which stress the need for access to services and facilities, an important issue for nutrition.

State health policies

The policy environment at State level has been strongly influenced by economic issues; State governments and the Commonwealth Government are all concerned about limiting costs associated with hospital and other curative health care. Health policies appear to be fluid, the recent changes in government in three States are likely to influence policy. For example, Western Australia has taken up a proposal to restructure health services and to separate the policy and service-provision functions, and to negotiate within the Health Department contracts for financing.^{61,62} Moreover, 'population health status goals [are] to be the determinant of purchasing strategy'.⁶¹

Socio-demographic issues

Social security

For those Australians unable to provide fully for themselves or their families, the Department of Social Security, whose charter is to deliver social security entitlements 'with fairness, courtesy and efficiency', administers a range of income support programs.⁶³ Income-support levels take into account rental, telephone and education expenses, but there is no specific consideration of food costs. The Social Policy Research Centre is an independent advisory body within the social security portfolio. In May 1992 the Centre surveyed 600 recipients of the 'one-off' April 1992 family allowance bonus. Thirty-two per cent of those surveyed said that they spent the money on 'food and bills'.⁶³ It is difficult to find a policy application for the results of the survey, but they do suggest that some recipients may have considered their food purchases to be constrained by income. Other studies, however, provide more direct, and so more useful, information on this.^{64,65} The Australian Institute of Family Studies moved from the social security portfolio to the health portfolio on 1 July 1993. It has conducted a survey on quality of life that may provide information relevant to food and nutrition monitoring.

Social justice

Although income support is an important element of social justice, the major thrust of Commonwealth Government policy is to remove barriers that cause some Australians to need income support. The Social Justice Strategy⁶⁶ is required to involve all portfolios. For the 1993–94 financial year it highlights six key areas: jobs, training and education; health and community services; assistance for the aged and people with disabilities; Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders; housing and urban reform; and child care. The following are the core areas of the Strategy:

- an integrated approach to skills development and education, to ensure equitable distribution of the benefits expected from economic restructuring;
- assistance for families with low incomes, including provision for children living in poverty and the aged;
- matching services and their delivery to the needs of the community;
- improved lives for disadvantaged groups;
- breaking down language barriers that prevent full participation in the community;
- health care system reform, to contain costs and maintain the level of service;
- incorporation in government policy of currently available information and continued research into the 'more complex causes of poverty, including locational factors'. This includes the special problems of remote communities;
- the affordability of housing;
- improving links between transport, housing, employment and education, in cooperation with local and State governments, to make Australia's cities better places in which to live.⁶⁶

The former Departments of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs and Health, Housing and Community Services have jointly funded access to services for migrants, with grants of \$4 000 000 per annum for three years, commencing in 1991–92, to community organisations for support services, including services for the non-frail

ethnic aged.⁴⁶ The policy priority was to increase the capacity of migrants to participate in Australian 'economic and social life, particularly through the provision of programs for recently arrived migrants', and advocacy to make mainstream service providers responsive to the needs of new migrants.⁴⁶

Of all policies, the objectives of social and welfare policies are perhaps the most amenable to cooperation and integration with food and nutrition policy objectives. At present food and nutrition issues are not as prominent in social and welfare strategies as are social and welfare issues in food and nutrition strategies, but there is ample common ground.

Education and training

Education policies influence the food and nutrition system in two ways. Formal education of health and food industry professionals depends on the availability and quality of higher education and the weighting given to nutrition considerations within courses. Access for some tertiary students may depend on external supports, such as AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY. The Department of Social Security takes education expenses into account when setting benefit levels.⁶³ The formal support for training in dietetics, for example, is limited by the current determination that masters degree courses do not qualify for AUSTUDY. Professional-level nutrition training is at graduate level and major opportunities lie in MSc level nutritionist-dietitian programs available in most States. Students who are ineligible for AUSTUDY or ABSTUDY may qualify for a supplementary payment open to all students.⁶⁶

Education policies have a more direct relationship with nutrition education in schools. The Commonwealth Government's objective for schooling is to prepare students for life in general and for full participation in society. It does not, however, incorporate in any specific way consideration of health-enhancing behaviours, skills or knowledge or the necessity for a school environment consistent with health-enhancing dietary skills and behaviours.⁶⁷ A draft National Health [Education and Physical Education] Statement was in preparation and expected to be completed in 1993;⁶⁸ it gives full consideration to nutrition issues. The priority area in 1992-93 was vocational education and training, particularly through the TAFE system.⁶⁶ This may bear on training for several food industry or food service vocations. It may also influence the level of nutrition knowledge incorporated into post-secondary physical education and sports physiology courses.

Food regulation

Australia's excellent food supply is also a valuable commodity for generating trade and employment opportunities. The very important roles of the Australian food supply in employment, export revenue and public health and safety must be taken into account in the development and amendment of food standards. The challenge is to create a regulatory framework that fosters innovation, accommodates technological development, and at the same time protects the interests of consumers.

Historically, the food regulatory environment in Australia has been the responsibility of the States. The Commonwealth's food-related responsibilities are administered by the National Food Authority and the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. The Australian Customs Service administers customs and excise, and an Anti-dumping Authority was established in 1988 to investigate possible dumping or subsidisation of imports.⁶⁹

The process of food regulation in Australia dates from 1838, when the colony of New South Wales passed the Adulteration of Bread Act.⁷⁰ Before Federation, different governments within Australia enacted legislation aimed at public health concerns associated with the manufacture and sale of food. In 1908 a conference of premiers from the newly constituted States resolved that 'uniform legislation for the standardisation of manufactured food is desirable'.⁷⁰ Although the need was identified and agreed upon, no successful mechanism for developing uniform national food standards was found for over 80 years, despite the important consultative process developed within the NHMRC in the last 40 years.

In 1953 the NHMRC established a Food Standards Sub-committee, reconstituted as the Commonwealth Food Standards Committee in 1955. Its terms of reference were to inquire into and advise the NHMRC on all aspects of food legislation (including standards necessary for the safe manufacture, labelling, packaging, storage and advertising of food for human consumption) and to produce draft standards for recommendation to the States for adoption on a uniform basis across Australia. The Committee subsequently became the Australian Food Standards Committee, located in the Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs in 1989,⁷⁰ but national uniformity of standards continued to be elusive.

The food industry is an important part of the nation's economy and the increasing policy emphasis on gaining export income from the food industry has become an important aspect of food regulation. In the late 1980s regulation of the food industry was the subject of several government inquiries, chiefly because of political and industry recognition that the food regulatory mechanisms of the time were impeding trade. Two significant inquiries were those of the Victorian Business Regulation Review Unit and the Industries Assistance Commission. The latter's 1989 inquiry into the food processing and beverages industry examined 'factors which may facilitate or impede the growth, competitiveness and efficiency' of that industry.⁷¹ The terms of reference dealt with structural issues and impediments to export marketing, and included 'the scope and implementation of food law and regulation in Australia; and government regulation of packaging and labelling'.⁷¹

The Industries Assistance Commission's conclusions were consistent with those of the earlier Victorian Business Regulation Review Unit inquiry: existing food regulations reduced industry efficiency and discouraged exports, particularly of value-added products. The Commission recommended, among other things, harmonisation of food laws and regulations between the States, retention of food composition standards, State adoption, by reference from the National Food Standards Council, of amendments to the standards, and reformation of regulations so as to take account of the 'essential role of protecting the health and safety of consumers'. It also recommended the removal of the NHMRC Public Health Committee from the advisory process. These recommendations had implications for longer term public health issues such as nutrition-related chronic disease risk.⁷¹

The Commission's report provided the catalyst for the harmonisation of food regulations across Australia and for formation of the National Food Authority. In 1990 the Commonwealth and all State governments agreed on a revised assessment mechanism for food standards, resulting in the National Food Standards Agreement of July 1991 and the subsequent development of the *National Food Authority Act 1991*.

The National Food Authority

The National Food Authority was established in August 1991 as a scientific body to develop standards for all food on the Australian domestic market. It replaced the previous multi-committee structure of the NHMRC and the Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs' role in food standards policy.

All States agreed to adopt by reference food standards recommended by the Authority and approved by majority decision of the National Food Standards Council. This ensured that for the first time in Australia's history uniform food standards were to be applied throughout the country. To this end, a 'Model Food Act' has been developed as a blueprint for other food laws (but is not legislation in its own right). The National Food Standards Council comprises Commonwealth and State ministers with responsibility for State regulation of food, usually the health portfolio.

The development, variation and review of standards by the National Food Authority is governed by legislated procedures, and objectives specified in the National Food Authority Act, and there is a requirement for public accountability and transparency of the decision-making process. The procedures, objectives and broader roles available to the Authority in conducting its legislated functions are detailed in the final report of the National Food Authority policy review, published in May 1993.⁷⁰

The Authority's core responsibilities are to develop, vary and review the standards applying to food available in Australia and to make recommendations to the National Food Standards Council.⁷⁰ After receiving an application for a new standard or variation to an existing standard, the Authority is required to seek public comment on the application. It is required to meet prescribed time limits (normally 12 months) for the development and variation of standards in response to applications, and 'must have regard' for particular objectives, which, in descending order of priority, are as follows:

- the protection of public health and safety;
- the provision of adequate information relating to food to enable consumers to make informed choices and to prevent fraud and deception;
- the promotion of fair trading in food;
- the promotion of trade and commerce in the food industry;
- the promotion of consistency between domestic and international food standards where these are at variance, providing it does not lower the Australian standard.⁷²

An immediate priority of the Authority is to undertake a standard-by-standard review of existing standards, based on objectives set out in the National Food Authority Act. The review is scheduled to be concluded in 1998.⁷⁰

Other regulatory components

Food hygiene regulations are made under State Food Acts, which govern the cleanliness and construction of food premises to minimise the risk of food-borne contamination. Commonwealth and State legislation also regulates, to varying degrees, premises where food is produced. Trade measurement and packaging legislation regulates packaged articles, including foodstuffs, and imposes labelling requirements such as those for contents and the address in Australia of the packer or the person for whom an item is packed.

Food regulation may also need to take into account findings under the Commonwealth *Trade Practices Act 1974* and similar State legislation.

Some sectors of the food industry have statutory authorities that regulate the bulk sale of specific commodities. These may be national or State authorities. Examples are the Australian Wheat Board and milk marketing boards in most States.

The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service

The Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) is responsible for administering laws governing imports of foods. There is also legislation that governs a range of exports of agri-foods. AQIS is represented on the National Food Authority Advisory Committee and there is a memorandum of understanding between AQIS and the Authority to work toward streamlining the imported food risk assessment process.⁷⁰ AQIS also has a certification program for imports and it consults with the States to avoid duplication of regulations. Among its objectives are the following:

- to assist Australian exporters of food and food-related products by providing information, services and facilities to help them comply with importing country food and quarantine regulations;
- to regulate food imports to provide needed assurances that they are safe and wholesome;
- to safeguard and advance Australia's trade interests by appropriate input into and participation in international bodies formulating food standards and trade policies, including the Codex Alimentarius Commission (the international consultative body on food standards and harmonisation) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade;
- to coordinate Australia's contribution to the establishment and review of international food standards and codes of practice.⁷³

AQIS is the national contact point for the Codex Alimentarius Commission and works with the National Food Authority on international food standards issues. It has also established a national committee to coordinate Australian involvement in the Codex Alimentarius Commission and its subsidiaries. The committee comprises representatives of consumer and industry organisations, State authorities and relevant Commonwealth agencies.⁷³

Economic issues associated with food

The issue of ... economic returns versus nutritional philosophy should be addressed.⁷³

The quality of the Australian food supply is acknowledged to be an important factor in promoting Australian food products on the international market.^{69,73,74,75} A significant proportion of Australia's export trade is in food commodities, and there is also a policy focus on improving the export performance of manufactured food items. Policy making about food issues is primarily responsive to Australia's international food trade and, although the domestic market is important, for many food producers cultivating the export market is an economic necessity. The Commonwealth Government understands and encourages the need to export and sees food exports, including exports of processed products, as an essential contributor to export earnings.^{69,73,75}

Primary industry

Although the domestic market is the focus of nutrition monitoring, that market is inextricably linked with global trade. Australia's export income has traditionally derived from primary produce, to the extent that the domestic market is a minor influence on primary industries. The prime examples are the beef industry (about 55 per cent of production is exported) and the wheat industry (about 70 per cent of production is exported), whose economic fates are tied to movements in global trade and Australia's relationship with its markets and competitors. The principal current concern for primary industry is the erosion of its markets and its financial returns as a consequence of instability in the global marketplace and efforts are being directed towards increased penetration of the Asian market. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, with the support of the Department of Primary Industries and Energy, worked towards a conclusion to the Uruguay Round of Multi-lateral Trade Negotiations, advocating reductions in domestic support and export subsidies, particularly by the European Community.^{73,76}

There are many examples of the implementation strategies used by AQIS to meet its objective 'to assist Australian exporters of food and food-related products by providing information, services and facilities to help them comply with importing country food and quarantine regulations'.⁷³ The Service coordinates the 'Keep it Clean' program, an industry-Commonwealth-State agreement on chemical residues (especially anti-bacterials), and there is also a National Antimicrobial Residue Minimisation Program.⁷³ The Animal Health Committee Subcommittee on Chemical Residues in Animal Products was established in 1991 to manage Australian surveillance programs. Other export-oriented measures are the Extended Residue Program (a meat certification plan for exports) and the development of a National Standard for Organic and Bio-dynamic Produce. The National Food Authority conducts regular market basket surveys in which primary products are included.⁷⁰

The domestic market is a major market for many kinds of foods. The Department of Primary Industries and Energy has primary responsibility in this area and is a powerful influence on production (AQIS is a part of this Department). There is also an active program of review of national statutory marketing authorities, which have been identified as a source of some inefficiencies and cost imposts. A levy is placed on a number of industries and funds raised thereby are directed towards research and development in those industries.⁷³

Several changes to statutory arrangements were made in 1991-92, affecting the dairy industry, broadacre crops and horticultural products.⁷³ The Australian Horticultural Corporation, established under the provisions of the *Australian Horticultural Corporation Act 1987* and the *Australian Horticultural Corporation Amendment Act 1991*, subsumed the Australian Honey Board; the Grains Industry Council was established to coordinate grains policy; and several changes were made to dairy legislation and the operations of the Australian Dairy Corporation.⁷³ As well as national authorities, State authorities control several commodities. Deregulation of the egg industries in New South Wales and South Australia resulted in a significant decrease in price in those markets.⁷³

Secondary industry

The Government's desire to export is also a force in the food processing sector. The terms of reference of the Prime Minister's Science Council⁷⁴ and of the Industries Assistance Commission report into the food processing and beverages industry⁷¹ both had an export focus. Almost every meeting or conference at which food industry matters are discussed raises the importance of developing Asian markets for Australian processed food products. It is commonly observed that the Australian domestic market is small, stable and saturated with product,^{59,77} that Australian gross domestic product is falling,^{78,79} that Australia is competing in commodity markets in which prices are falling and competition from less-developed countries is increasing,^{77,79,80} and that Australian value-added food products are inadequately marketed, particularly in the burgeoning Asian market.^{73,81,82}

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade contributes to the promotion of Australian-manufactured food exports and, through AUSTRADE, the trade portfolio is actively promoting value-added food exports, particularly into the north Asian market.⁷⁶ AUSTRADE also carries prime responsibility, on behalf of the Department of Industry, Technology and Regional Development, for an investment program for the food industry and has developed an investment kit for the food processing industry. The Department of Industry, Technology and Regional Development is committed to stimulating new investment and export market development; it and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade have a common interest in the food industry as a prospective exporter of high-value-added products. The two Departments cooperated to present a position at the Uruguay Round of GATT discussions intended to improve market access for Australian processed foods.^{69,76} The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is also pursuing the Closer Economic Relations trade agreement with New Zealand, with the aim of removing impediments to bilateral trade, including food and other standards, taxation, customs and quarantine.⁷⁶

The Department of Industry, Technology and Regional Development has undertaken a pilot networking initiative to encourage strategic export alliances between food companies and thus increase penetration of Asian markets.⁶⁹ A portfolio objective is to promote the integration of Australian industry with global markets through investment, trade finance and intersectoral cooperation. There is collaboration between this Department, AUSTRADE, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the business community, researchers and State governments, and there is a potential meeting place with the health sector through promoting the safe, clean and wholesome nature of Australian food.⁶⁹ The Agri-food Council and the Clean Food Export Strategy are two important export-oriented initiatives that are the joint responsibility of the Department of Primary Industries and Energy and the Department of Industry, Technology and Regional Development. The Australian Industry Development Corporation and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) are statutory bodies within the industry, technology and regional development portfolio, and the CSIRO in particular is active in food and nutrition research through several of its divisions.

The Prime Minister's Science Council has noted that health and nutrition considerations in the more affluent sectors of the Asian market are identical to those in Australia and that there should be 'a greater emphasis by the food industry on the

added-value gained by improving the nutritional qualities of processed foods. This should coincide with the expectations of consumers'.⁷⁴

Part of the global market trade is in highly subsidised products, and to compete with such products Australia needs to promote brand uniqueness or niche marketing for exports. Highly processed food exports from Australia totalled \$2.6 thousand million in 1991–92; the total for all food and beverage exports was \$7.6 thousand million.⁸³ In 1992 half of Australia's highly processed food exports went to the Asian market, Japan being the most important destination.⁸³ Numerous programs are directed at improving export potential, and many of them also affect the domestic market. Industry research and development is actively encouraged throughout the food production area, and several programs seek to coordinate the research effort. The Department of Industry, Technology and Regional Development provided \$3.1 million through its Generic Technology Grants program in 1991–92⁶⁹ and the Commonwealth also provides research and development support through the Grants for Industry Research and Development Board.⁶⁹ The Australian Industry and Technology Council (a ministerial council) fosters harmonisation of research and development efforts between the Commonwealth, the States and New Zealand, while the Departments of Industry, Technology and Regional Development and Primary Industries and Energy work together on food industry enhancement and have produced a joint statement on Australian agri-food industries with the purpose of coordinating export promotion.⁸⁴

Despite Australia's excess of food over needs, processed food imports were valued at \$2.2 thousand million in 1991–92. Imports were primarily tea and coffee, confectionery (chocolates), processed seafood, and liquor (spirits).⁸³ Over 94 per cent of the domestic supply of processed foods is still Australian in origin, although the market as a whole is strongly influenced by the global market.

Australia's interaction with the global food system entails more than export potential. The removal of barriers to international trade and the consequent encouragement of food imports could improve the accessibility and availability of foods appropriate to nutritional goals. On the other hand, the opposite could occur if imports were to rise to a sufficient level to destroy the 'uncompetitive' Australian industry, and then subsequently increase in cost to Australians as other global players' export policies changed.⁸⁵ There may be a point of no return for some industry sectors and this could certainly affect the shape and composition of the food supply.

The environment and ecologically sustainable development

Ecologically sustainable development and respect for the physical environment are important factors to be taken into account in the implementation of the National Food and Nutrition Policy.⁷⁵ Government initiatives on the environment interact with the food supply.

The environment

All areas of government give consideration to environmental issues, but primary responsibility lies with the Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories. This Department has a program objective to 'advise on and implement policies and programs for the protection of the environment, while ensuring its use is ecologically sustainable', and it fostered the Intergovernmental Agreement on the Environment between the States, local government and other federal departments.⁸⁶ Australia is a

signatory to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the International Convention on the Conservation of Biological Diversity, and a national strategy for conserving Australia's biological diversity is being developed.^{76,86} Other policy initiatives with implications for the food supply include draft strategies for greenhouse gases and for waste minimisation and recycling.⁸⁶

Environmental health

Responsibility for environmental health—that is, the effect of the environment on human health—lies within the health portfolio⁵² and is treated separately from environmental protection or conservation. Nevertheless, public health is an issue in such areas as use of agricultural or other chemicals and contamination of air, water, land or food. It is intended that the risk assessment of chemicals (including those in food) will be rationalised from its current arrangement, in which four Commonwealth departments and the NHMRC are involved.⁵² The NHMRC has reported on environment and sustainable development issues in three publications: *Ecologically sustainable development: the health perspective*,³⁹ and *Health implications of long-term climatic change*, volumes I and II.^{87, 88}

Ecologically sustainable development

A report on ecologically sustainable development was tabled in the Commonwealth Parliament in December 1991; further reports on intersectoral issues were released in February 1992.⁸⁶ These issues included agriculture and fisheries, manufacturing and transport, and health and equity. There is as yet no indication that nutrition issues have been given priority in this area.

Another issue of importance is land and water degradation (see Section 1.1). The major policy initiative is the National Decade of Landcare Program, which provides a framework for combating land degradation and encourages intersectoral and intergovernmental cooperation.⁷³ Key players from industry, the conservation movement, research, State and local governments and Commonwealth departments were consulted in the formulation of the Program. The Commonwealth component was released jointly by the Department of Primary Industries and Energy and the then Department of the Arts, Sport, the Environment and Territories in 1992.^{73,86} The primary industries and energy portfolio also takes in the Murray–Darling Basin Commission, which deals with degradation, pollution and salinity in the Murray–Darling Basin.⁷³

Relationship with other economic policy issues

Other relevant economic policy issues are negotiations for Australian fisheries access arrangements with Japan and the United States, including conservation measures for tuna and ecologically related species.⁷⁶

The need to consider the environment in planning for industry is also recognised by the Department of Industry, Technology and Regional Development, which is seeking closer integration of environment and industry policies, with a major project being better resource processing without compromising existing Commonwealth commitments on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and environmental issues.⁶⁹ This has implications for the food supply, and so it is important that government health issues are similarly considered.

Food and nutrition policy

Nutrition policy exists as a nexus among other policies—agricultural, health, medical, social, economic, educational, environmental ...⁴³

Nutrition education and the beginnings of a national nutrition policy

Traditionally, the primary public health nutrition strategy has been to encourage healthy patterns of eating by providing advice and information; that is, what is usually called 'nutrition education'. Although nutrition policies have had the goal of reducing the extent of poor nutrition, the strategic approach has largely been limited to or based on the 'nutrition education' paradigm. In contrast, food policy is an economic policy dealing with one of Australia's major export-earning commodities and a major source of employment.

A policy implementation process based primarily on nutrition education is limited in its ability to deal with the constraints imposed by the food supply, knowledge, social or economic status, personal or cultural preferences, and the effects of other government policies developed independently of nutrition concerns. Nutrition advice has for many years been provided through the NHMRC, although there has been no mechanism for broad dissemination or active uptake of the advice.

A broader concept for nutrition policy was given impetus by the Commonwealth Department of Health's Food and Nutrition Policy, announced in 1979, which called for a unified approach by 'all sectors of Government including those concerned with agricultural, social, medical and economic policies—in co-operation with professional groups in the community, the food industry and consumer organisations.'⁸⁹ The policy implementation strategy—the Dietary Guidelines for Australians—announced in 1981 was based on the Policy's 'eight dietary goals for Australia'.⁴⁸ The Dietary Guidelines were supported and endorsed by a broad spectrum of interest groups in Australia and used widely as a vehicle for nutrition education.

Nutrition and 'health for all'

A succession of federal government initiatives laid the foundation for the National Food and Nutrition Policy, announced in 1992.⁷⁵ In 1985 the Better Health Commission was established to introduce a preventive health approach based on the WHO recommendations enunciated at Alma Ata in 1978⁵¹ and the 'Health for All by the Year 2000' concept that followed in 1981,⁹¹ later extended to become the Ottawa Charter.⁵⁸ The Commission instituted two task forces of importance to nutrition—the Nutrition Task Force and the Task Force on Cardiovascular Disease^{92,93,94}—and developed and reported on priority goals and targets for public health.

Subsequently, the Health Targets and Implementation (Health for All) Committee of the Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council developed health goals and targets based on the Better Health Commission's recommendations. These were endorsed in 1988 by the Australian Health Ministers' Council.⁹³ The National Better Health Program was established in 1989 to work towards the agreed goals.²⁰ Nutrition was one of the five priority areas of the Program and a significant component of three of the other areas—hypertension, the health of the elderly, and preventable cancers.

During the planning phase of the National Better Health Program, a 1989 Australian Institute of Health statistical report on nutritional goals and targets concluded that,

unless strategies additional to (conventional) nutrition education were introduced to promote change, nutrition targets would not be achieved.⁹⁶ The ability of persuasive methods alone has also been questioned by others; for example, Harvey et al.⁹⁷ At about the same time, the NHMRC released the report of its Subcommittee on Nutrition Education, which attempted to deal with the same problem from a different perspective; that is, by invoking an expanded concept of nutrition education to include, among other things, the removal of social, educational and economic barriers to good nutrition.⁹⁹

Implementation of the National Better Health Program included the establishment of infrastructure—in some instances for the first time—for nutrition promotion, using the Ottawa Charter principles of equity in health, which focus on prevention, community participation, multiple strategies and intersectoral action.⁹⁸ In addition, the Program supported a proposal for the development of a national food and nutrition policy. In August 1991 the Commonwealth Government approved the development of a national food and nutrition policy and directed a committee of government, industry and consumer representatives to oversee that development.

By this time, the importance of developing an integrated national food and nutrition policy was widely understood. Its scope was seen to include not only social, economic, cultural and political factors that influence nutritional status, but also to equip people to make informed choices about food and to remove impediments to the exercise of those choices. This involved education (reasons for changing), information (what to change) and guidelines (how to change). It also involves changing the food supply, which has implications for primary producers, food processors, distributors, advertisers and legislators. An integrated policy also has a responsibility to address the needs of all the population, ('strategies aimed at reducing inequalities in nutritional health'⁹⁹). The National Food and Nutrition Policy contains such strategies (see Box 1.1).

The National Food and Nutrition Policy

The Commonwealth Government announced the National Food and Nutrition Policy in September 1992,⁷⁴ and the implementation phase, based on four priority objectives (see Box 1.1), began immediately. Priority policy strategies are now being implemented under the National Health Advancement Program. The policy implementation phase is advised by a small Implementation Consultative Group comprising representatives of the Department of Human Services & Health, the NHMRC, the National Food Authority, industry, and consumers.⁹⁸

Projects in progress include:

- the development of national nutrition curriculum material for schools;
- the development of a video to inform older people about good nutrition;
- the development of a point-of-sale program to help consumers make healthy food choices in the retail environment;
- the development of a demonstration project to improve the nutritional quality of hotel meals,
- the development of a demonstration project to reduce the level of meat fat in the food supply;

- the evaluation of Australia's existing food selection guides as a basis for developing a national food selection guide;
- the establishment of a national campaign to increase the consumption of bread;
- the development of a collaborative project with two local governments to identify barriers to access to healthy food within a locality;
- the establishment of a national collaborative pilot project to develop a resource to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities deal with food and nutrition concerns.⁹⁸

A resource kit to help health professionals inform consumers about the Australian Dietary Guidelines for Australians has also been developed.⁹⁸

The National Food and Nutrition Policy development process was broadly consultative and from the outset sought to link industry and agriculture outcomes with nutrition outcomes. The Policy complements other relevant government policies (for example, the Joint Statement on Australian Agri-food Industries,⁸⁴ the Social Justice Strategy,⁶⁶ and Women's Health Policy⁵²).

Consistency with the Commonwealth Government's Social Justice Strategy was a key issue in developing the Food and Nutrition Policy.⁹⁹ Thus the Policy includes a commitment to equitable availability of appropriate foods (with particular reference to remote locations), to improved affordability of nutritious foods, and to equitable access to education and information about food and about nutrition.⁷⁴ The Policy includes intersectoral cooperation and community involvement as key factors to be considered in its implementation. The Policy is aimed at the needs of population subgroups at risk of nutrition-related disadvantage.

The World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition

The National Food and Nutrition Policy complements the World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition arising from the joint FAO/WHO International Conference on Nutrition held in Rome in December 1992.⁹⁹ The strategies outlined in both documents are very similar and both emphasise the need for ongoing monitoring of the food and nutrition system. It is intended that the Plan of Action for Nutrition will be considered in parallel with the implementation of the National Food and Nutrition Policy.⁹⁸

Box 1.1: National Food and Nutrition Policy—priority objectives and implementation strategies

Objective 1: improvements in the knowledge and skills necessary for Australians to choose a healthy diet

Strategies

- (a) National food and nutrition education curriculum material for schools will be developed and supported through program development and teacher training.*
- (b) Programs to upgrade the nutrition skills of primary health care workers will be developed.*
- (c) Communication strategies to make the dietary guidelines much better known to present and future consumers will be implemented. Such strategies may include education programs in: schools, adult education authorities, community health centres and energy utilities to increase consumer knowledge and skills in purchasing, preparation, and storage of foods; public and private health organisations to provide consistent nutrition messages; the food processing industry, governments and retailers to provide point-of-sale information relevant to diet; the food industry and governments to promote generic foods supported in the dietary guidelines (for example, bread and cereals, fruit and vegetables).*
- (d) The NHMRC is to develop and promote dietary guidelines for children, with the issue of advertising directed at children to be further researched as part of their development.*
- (e) The National Food Authority in its review of food standards is to consider the need to optimise accurate and meaningful consumer information.*

Objective 2: incorporation of food and nutrition objectives into a broad range of policy areas and sectors

Strategies

- (a) Demonstration projects will be supported to improve signals between customers and producers, and encourage the production and marketing of food in a range of settings which is more consistent with the dietary guidelines.*
- (b) Public and private sector 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 in this area.*
- (c) Recognising the need for ecologically sustainable development, food production, processing and distribution reforms will be supported which improve the competitiveness of the Australian food industry in a manner consistent with ecologically sustainable development.*
- (d) Local government authorities will be encouraged to take food issues into account. Such issues would include access to supermarkets, land use, food availability and local food and nutrition needs.*

(continued)

Source: Commonwealth Department of Health, Housing and Community Services. Food and Nutrition Policy. Canberra: AGPS, 1992; 1–32.

Box 1.1 (continued): National Food and Nutrition Policy—priority objectives and implementation strategies

Objective 3: support for community based initiatives to improve the diet of people with special needs

Strategies

- (a) *Support will be provided for research and development projects on barriers to the availability, accessibility and cost of nutritious food for communities which have either socioeconomic and/or geographic disadvantage with a view to action to overcome these barriers. The needs of lower socioeconomic groups and older people need to be particularly considered.*
- (b) *In line with recommendations contained in the report from the National Conference on Aboriginal Nutrition in Remote and Rural Communities (1991), models for community-based food and nutrition programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be developed, and appropriate curriculum material will be made available for nutrition components in Aboriginal health worker (and other professional) education, training and employment programs.*
- (c) *Support appropriate and ongoing training for nutrition advisors for special needs groups.*

Objective 4: ongoing monitoring and surveillance of the food system

Strategies

- (a) *The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), in collaboration with other relevant agencies, will report publicly on a biennial basis (initially), and assess against the national food and nutrition goals and targets:*
 - *changes in the food supply;*
 - *information on food sold;*
 - *national dietary survey analyses which show food and nutrient intakes of individuals;*
 - *changes in the nutritional status of the community and subgroups.*
- (b) *Key sectors in the food system are to support the continuation of regular monitoring and wide dissemination of the information on:*
 - *food-borne and food-related illness;*
 - *pesticide and chemical residues in the food supply;*
 - *the composition of the food supply.*
- (c) *AIHW is to continue monitoring health morbidity/mortality data in relation to food and nutrition at the whole community level and for subgroups in the population.*
- (d) *NHMRC is to:*
 - *develop research strategies to characterise food consumption patterns and increase understanding of determinants of dietary change;*
 - *evaluate current literature on the links between diet and disease and recommend dietary change to the community;*
 - *define costs and benefits of different components of implementation strategies.*

State and Territory nutrition policies

With the exception of Victoria, no formal nutrition policies existed at the State level prior to the announcement of the National Food and Nutrition Policy. A discussion paper on a South Australian Health Commission food and nutrition policy was released in 1989¹⁰⁰ but did not gain sufficient intersectoral support to proceed to policy status. The Victorian Food and Nutrition Policy, adopted in 1987, was based on the Dietary Guidelines for Australians and the recommendations of the Better Health Commission, including its nutrition goals and targets.¹⁰¹ The policy process and its relationship with the development of food and nutrition policies have been reviewed comprehensively by Powles et al.¹⁰² The Victorian Policy was interesting because it required the cooperation of the health, education and agriculture portfolios and survived, albeit in a 'revised, brief and rather general form', ministerial changes and concerns from primary and secondary industry about their lack of involvement in its development.¹⁰² The achievements of the Victorian Policy helped establish a will towards national action. Since the National Food and Nutrition Policy was announced, most States and the Northern Territory have commenced the development of food and nutrition policies, using the national policy as a guide. Implementation strategies for policies at the State level will reflect local priorities, although based on the same premises at the national level.

Non-government policies

Non-government health organisations

Several non-government organisations have policies or positions on matters of relevance to food and nutrition. The National Heart Foundation of Australia first reviewed the relationship between dietary fat and heart disease in 1967, taking the position that hyperlipidaemia was associated with heart disease and could be reduced by dietary means.¹⁰³ The Foundation has essentially held to this view in its two most recent reviews, which were position statements on diet and coronary heart disease¹⁰⁴ and on the management of hyperlipidaemias.¹⁰⁵ Its policy direction is compatible with that of the National Food and Nutrition Policy. Similarly, the Dietitians Association of Australia¹⁰⁶ and the Public Health Association of Australia¹⁰⁷ support the national policy direction.

Consumers

The Australian Consumers Association project to develop a consumer-oriented food policy was an important contribution to the development of the National Food and Nutrition Policy,¹⁰⁸ a process in which the Association was directly involved. Despite some differences in viewpoint, consumer needs are integral to the National Food and Nutrition Policy's implementation. A particular difference in emphasis, however, is consumers' concern with food safety. This is an important point for those who implement national food and nutrition policy, because the concern persists in the community despite clear scientific evidence of the safety of the Australian food supply. It also has implications for export initiatives for Australian food, which rely to a large extent on the clean, wholesome nature of the Australian product in marketing.

Food industries

The food processing industry has been consulted about and involved in policy initiatives relating to food and in the food and nutrition policy process generally through the peak industry body, the Food Industry Council of Australia. The retail food industry also participated in the national policy development, being represented by the Australian Supermarket Institute.

The food manufacturing and retail industries have been prominent in nutrition information activities for more than a decade, although often on an ad hoc basis. Recent years have seen the forging of links between the public and private sectors and a more collaborative approach. In particular, the New South Wales Department of Health component of the National Better Health Program sponsored a seminar on corporate nutrition policy in February 1991.¹⁰⁹ Of the 58 companies that participated in the seminar and were surveyed in November 1991, eight asserted that they had a formalised nutrition policy. Forty companies were surveyed in August 1992; 10 of them asserted they had formal policies; an additional 10 companies stated an intention to formalise corporate nutrition policy.¹¹⁰

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