We cannot risk nutrition neglect in early childhood education and care

Dietitians Australia is urging the Federal Government to urgently overhaul the food and nutrition standards and supporting guidance within the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, to give Australian families peace of mind their children are not at risk of nutrition neglect when attending centres.

Nearly 1 million Australian children attend Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres or family-based services that often provide food daily, where they often eat breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea.

“We currently have a haphazard approach to nutrition standards in ECEC in Australia,” Dietitians Australia President Dr Fiona Willer said.

“Depending on which State or Territory you live in, or which centre your child attends, the food they are served on-site may or may not be nutritious.

“The existing National Quality Framework for ECEC provides limited guidance for providers when it comes to food and nutrition, leading to varied interpretations and confusion among centre staff and for those that are tasked with regulating services.

“In the more extreme cases, this puts us in a situation where Australian children are at risk of being exposed to harmful food allergens, swallowing or even choking incidents as a result of unsafe food practices.

“Safe mealtimes and quality nutrition should be the minimum standard in ECEC–our children must be protected and deserve nourishing meals delivered with consistency and care.

“Our current system is failing the services and the parents.

“Regulation needs to be more prescriptive; food service training needs to be benchmarked, and on-the-ground support from accredited practising dietitians should be available to all services nationally – currently, this is not the case.

“These mealtimes are about more than just nutrition–they shape children’s lifelong relationship with food, influence their capacity to learn and develop, and impact broader health and developmental outcomes.

“The first five years of life lay the foundation for a child’s brain development, lifelong eating habits, overall health and wellbeing, learning to eat in social settings and being exposed to food diversity,” Dr Willer said.

“We know that within the Early Childhood Education and Care sector, there are incredible examples of providers attempting to provide the best possible nutrition outcomes for children in their care,” said Dr Ros Sambell, Chair of the National Nutrition Network for Early Childhood Education and Care and senior lecturer at Edith Cowan University.

“But because the current regulatory framework and guidelines aren’t clear, it’s very hard for centre staff, educators and cooks to implement them.

“This also creates further challenges for assessment and rating staff trying to evaluate whether that centre is adopting best practices in the food environment.

“ECEC services often struggle to understand their obligations when it comes to the food environment, and a robust regulatory overhaul is needed to bring everyone up to best practice standards that Australian children deserve,” Dr Sambell said.

Dietitians Australia and the National Nutrition Network for ECEC stand ready to collaborate with Governments to ensure that Australian children in ECEC receive the nutrition foundations they deserve for optimal growth, learning and long-term health.

For interviews with Dietitians Australia President Dr Fiona Willer, please contact Media Manager Amy Phillips on 0409 661 920.

Note to Editors: Dietitians Australia is the leading voice in nutrition and dietetics, representing dietitians nationally and advocating for healthier communities. Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) is the only national credential recognised by the Australian Government as the quality standard for nutrition and dietetics services in Australia.