# Urgent calls for a national guarantee to ensure Australian children get safe, nutritious mealtimes in early childcare

With almost half of Australian children attending early childcare before the age of five, Dietitians Australia is **today calling for a national guarantee** they will be provided with safe and nutritious mealtimes while in care.

It comes following damning reports that as little as 65 cents a day per child is being spent on meals for a day in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres.

The peak body for dietetic and nutrition professionals in Australia is advocating that all Federal Election candidates pledge to strengthen the accountability of public funding provided to the ECEC sector, including mandating a portion of the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) be spent on food budgets within centres.

“Children are eating their breakfast, lunch and sometimes dinner each weekday in ECEC centres, the food provided should be safe to eat, nutritious, and delicious,” Dietitians Australia President Dr Fiona Willer said.

“We’re calling on all candidates in this coming election to show their support for childhood nutrition in ECEC and back our calls to mandate a portion of the Subsidy to be spent on nutrition each day.

“We have been loud in our calls for the Government to strengthen food and nutrition regulations, standards and guidance for ECEC providers and to ensure they are well supported by accredited practising dietitians and nutrition professionals to achieve this.

“In the more extreme cases, we’re seeing children at risk of choking, being scalded by unsafe food temperatures and experiencing life-threatening allergic reactions to food because of unsafe food provision practices.

“The current system is failing our children, families and those in the sector who are attempting to do the right thing, when it comes to food, nutrition and safety, and we cannot allow this to continue.

“We’ve seen reports over a third of educators, and cooks say their current food budgets are causing significant stress when it comes to providing quality, nutritious food.

“We know that the cost of meals per day varies between metro and regional areas, but our research shows that a minimum of at least $3 per child per day per child in cities and suburbs and $5 per child per day in regional and remote areas could move us closer to meeting recommendations for at least four to five core food groups at mealtimes,” Chair of the National Nutrition Network Dr Ros Sambell from Edith Cowan University said.

“Although the ECEC sector is heavily regulated in some areas, this isn’t the case for nutrition and food service.

“There isn’t enough education and training support for the sector when it comes to providing food and nutrition in centres, and for assessment staff to benchmark the food and nutrition quality and delivery in centres.

“Depending on which state or territory you live in, there is inconsistency in the level of food and nutrition support services available to the ECEC sector, we often see a lack of services in areas like the regional and remote areas, where we find there is an increased risk of poor nutrition in centres.

“We welcome the investment committed by the WA Labor Government through Healthway to fund the development of a best practice guide to food in ECEC. There is a gleaming opportunity for all States and Territories to embrace this best practice approach moving forward,” Dr Ros Sambell said.

“It will take many years to shift the standard on food and nutrition in the ECEC sector in Australia to where it should be, but we must take action to shift the nutrition needle now and enable a stronger foundation for our children,” Dietitians Australia President Dr Fiona Willer

said.

A guaranteed standard for funding food and nutrition in ECEC is one of three priority pledges Dietitians Australia is calling all major parties and candidates in the coming Federal Election to commit to. Sign the pledge and join our efforts.

**For media enquiries and interviews, 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.