

Select Committee on the Cost of Living

**Response to consultation
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Recipient

Select Committee on Cost of Living
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About Dietitians Australia

Dietitians Australia is the national association of the dietetic profession with over 8500 members, and branches in each state and territory. Dietitians Australia is the leading voice in nutrition and dietetics and advocates for the profession and the people and communities we serve.

The Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) program provides an assurance of safety and quality and is the foundation of self-regulation of the dietetic profession in Australia. Accredited Practising Dietitians have an important role in providing comprehensive care to Australians living with chronic disease as part of collaborative multidisciplinary teams. APDs are also equipped to support, advise and guide those experiencing food insecurity.

Recommendations

All Australians deserve affordable and equitable access to healthcare, and access to a safe, nutritious and adequate food supply.

Dietitians Australia recommends the Australian Government:

1. continue to fund the development and implementation of a National Nutrition Policy
2. fund the implementation of a routine, robust food security monitoring and surveillance system across Australia
3. provide affordable access to allied health care.

Discussion

Dietitians Australia welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Select Committee on the Cost of Living. Our response will focus on the following areas provided for in the Select Committee's Terms of Reference:

- measures to ease the cost of living through the provision of Government services
- any other related matter.

All Australians deserve affordable and equitable access to healthcare, and access to a safe, nutritious and adequate food supply.

As an increasing number of Australians struggle to meet the rising costs of living, many are having to make spending choices, such as paying rent and utilities over buying groceries, seeing a health care professional or filling a prescription.

Dietitians Australia acknowledges and supports the findings of the Select Committee's interim report. We offer the following additional measures to improve the lives of Australians and reduce the cost-of-living pressures we are all facing.

Measures to ease the cost of living through the provision of Government services

Australia has an ageing population. With that, we are seeing rising prevalence of nutrition-related chronic diseases like heart disease, stroke, Type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, lung and kidney diseases and mental illness, among many others.¹ Chronic conditions like these are complex in nature and require whole-of-person care delivered by collaborative multidisciplinary teams for the best outcomes. Supported self-management and other interventions implemented prior to or early in the onset of disease are known to improve a person's health outcomes, quality of life, productivity and longevity.²⁻⁶

With current rising costs of healthcare - through falling rates of bulkbilling and rising out-of-pocket costs across the sector – individuals and families are choosing to delay or forgo treatments, further impacting their health outcomes. The ABS reported that the proportion of people who delayed or did not use a health service when needed in 2022 - due to cost - increased to up to 16.4%. The proportion of people delaying or not filling a prescription due to cost also rose over the preceding 12 months.⁷ These figures were more pronounced for Australians living with chronic disease. This trend is a serious concern and has the potential for widespread societal and economic impacts should it continue.

As we have seen in the past few years, avoiding or delaying primary care appointments can lead to mounting pressure on the already-stretched public hospital system as individuals and families turn to emergency departments as an alternative for help.

Outcomes for Australians with chronic health conditions can be improved by better access to allied health practitioners, including Accredited Practising Dietitians.⁸ Dietitians Australia welcomes the considerable investment commitments to strengthen Medicare signalled in the 2023-24 Federal Budget announcement. These commitments represent a promising way forward for health system reform and will go some way to alleviate cost of living pressures on families needing access to health care. Further investments should be made to ensure Australians have better access to allied health care, particularly for those with chronic disease and ongoing health needs.

There are multiple ways in which the government can provide affordable access to allied health services to further reduce cost of living pressures. Among possible measures are:

- increasing the number and length of Medicare sessions for access to allied health
- promoting multidisciplinary comprehensive care.

These measures would provide further relief from the rising out of pocket costs and the current heavy reliance of public hospital emergency departments to address health needs. Reducing unnecessary emergency department visits would also reduce costs to government, free up emergency services to focus on true emergencies and provide better quality of care to all patients.

Any other related matter

Food security

Dietitians Australia recommends the Australian Government:

- fund the implementation of a routine, robust food security monitoring and surveillance system across Australia.
- continue to fund the development and implementation of a National Nutrition Policy.

Food security exists when all people always have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.⁹

Food insecurity exists whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire acceptable food in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.¹⁰ Food insecurity rarely happens in isolation but rather in co-occurrence with economic, health and housing insecurity and other hardships.

Food insecurity is associated with malnutrition and both under- and overweight/obesity, and chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease and mental illness.¹¹ It impacts on health, quality of life, social and emotional wellbeing, and productivity. It is especially hard-hitting for children. For them, food insecurity can cause negative short- and long-term academic, social, emotional, physical and developmental effects,^{9,12} in turn having long-lasting impacts on communities, societies, and economies. In response to rises in the cost of living, households commonly make sacrifices in the quality and amount of food purchased to be able to pay other bills. An increase in the prevalence of food insecurity in coming months and years is likely.

In Australia, food security is not measured at a population level regularly or consistently. It is estimated 4% to 13% of the general population are food insecure; and 22% to 32% of the Indigenous population, depending on location.⁹

There is a critical need to implement a routine, robust food security monitoring and surveillance system in Australia. This could be achieved through the Australian Government's adoption of existing tools such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) 18-item Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM).¹³ This is a validated, standardised scale which can assess the presence and severity of food insecurity at the household level in adults and children.

Dietitians Australia has been long calling on the Government to develop and implement an updated National Nutrition Policy and action plan, with the last being updated in 1992. Last year \$700k over four years was announced in the budget to develop a National Nutrition Policy framework.¹⁴ This policy is critical for Australia to coordinate efforts to guarantee access to adequate, affordable and nutritious food that meets the nutritional needs of all Australians.

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