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## Do not forget food: the essential ingredient in health and wellbeing of older Australians

The importance of providing nutritious food and satisfying mealtimes in the wellbeing of older Australians must be recognised if the recommendations from the Royal Commission's report into the impact of COVID-19 on aged care are to improve quality of life for residents.

Allied health practitioners such as Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) must be engaged in aged care homes, with the wider reaching role of food provision also prioritised.

Yesterday's report by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety recommends increased access for allied health practitioners to support aged care residents.

Whilst a positive move, the creation of new Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items must be beyond that of the current funding model to adequately address the true nutritional needs of older Australians during a pandemic.

"MBS items address concerns for individual residents – but a dietitian's role within an aged care home is much greater than one-on-one care. They champion food and nutrition for all residents working with all involved in food provision, from the catering service, nursing, and personal care staff through to cleaning and infection control. It requires an expert and coordinated system to ensure practical, safe food solutions are in place for each resident to receive meals that are appropriate for their health and dietary needs," said Robert Hunt, CEO of Dietitians Australia.

"For dietitians to make an impact, funding needs to cover both an individual consultation and the whole food service system."

Food must be prioritised, particularly during times of uncertainty, as it nourishes both physical and mental health. In times of loneliness and isolation, meals are a source of comfort to residents. When this is removed, the impact on mental health impacts is exacerbated.

"It was devastating to hear reports of people not being fed, or no support being provided to those who require assistance to eat and drink safely. Inadequate intake of food leads to malnutrition, lowering the ability to fight infection as well as affecting mood. This creates a downwards spiral, further decreasing appetite and exacerbating poor physical and mental health," said Hunt.

"While the focus of this pandemic is on infection control, we must think of how this impacts food service. Each home needs to have a plan to ensure they can continue to provide appropriate food and care to residents during an emergency," said Hunt

This would ensure residents will be safely and adequately fed and protect the health of both staff and residents.

"Food touches everyone in an aged care home – from administration, kitchen staff, nursing staff and allied health professionals. We all have a part to play to ensure residents can access individual nutrition care and have a robust food service system in place to support their requirements," said Hunt.

"The loss of older Australians during this pandemic is devastating. Being able to prioritise food and nutrition is vital to help prevent further casualties or exacerbation of poor health in aged care residents – and this is where APDs can help."

**For media enquiries and interviews, contact Pattie King, Dietitians Australia 0409 661 920.**

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**Note to Editors:** Dietitians Australia (DA) is the leading voice of nutrition in Australia, 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. For more information, including DA's media releases and position on topical nutrition issues, visit [www.dietitiansaustralia.org.au](http://www.dietitiansaustralia.org.au).