



Background paper:

**Data sources for food
and nutrition monitoring
in NSW and guidelines
for preparing special
issue monitoring reports**

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Data sources for food and nutrition monitoring in NSW and Guidelines for preparing 'special issue' monitoring reports

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The purpose of food and nutrition monitoring

'Monitoring' refers to a set of activities involving the collection, compilation and dissemination of information to identify how a particular situation is changing over time. The main purpose of monitoring is to support informed decision-making and action.

Consultation with key public health users of food and nutrition data in NSW in 1996-97 (Stickney et al 1998) revealed the following purposes for which food and nutrition information is required from a monitoring system:

- Getting support for increased investment in nutrition improvement strategies, and/or a particular nutrition issue, by the NSW Health system
- Priority-setting to select issues, target groups, and areas of action, from among all of the food and nutrition problems, vulnerable groups, and local Areas.
- Tracking the impact of collective efforts (policies, programs, interventions) to improve the food and nutrition situation in NSW.
- Keeping watch over a range of basic aspects of the food and nutrition situation to identify emerging problems/worsening trends

Other information identified in the 96-97 consultations, which is not part of a monitoring system (tracking a situation over time), but is regarded as a priority for compilation and dissemination to the field:

- The proportion of various diseases and conditions which can be attributed to poor nutrition and the costs of inaction in the area of nutrition.
- The range of strategies and programs that have been tried, and evidence of their effectiveness to address nutrition problems
- Models of effective interventions- and key considerations in implementation of them
- Principles of best practice extracted from evaluated, effective programs

‘Special issue’ monitoring reports

A document outlining strategic directions for nutrition in NSW for the next 5 years is currently being developed. Proposed priority areas for nutrition improvement include the promotion of:

Healthy weight

Breastfeeding

Vegetables and Fruit consumption

Fairer access to healthy food and activity choices/reducing inequalities in nutritional status.

To some extent, action in these areas is already taking place by Area Health Services. The aim of a strategic directions document for nutrition in NSW is to focus effort on these priorities so that the potential exists to make greater progress than would be possible without such a focus.

To meet the Area needs for food and nutrition information, as outlined in the previous section, 4 sets of companion reports are proposed. For each priority area, a “special issue’ monitoring report will be prepared, together with a report on guidance for effective programs.

The three main purposes of the special issue monitoring reports are to:

1. gain support for investing in programs and strategies to address these nutrition problems,
2. to raise awareness of the problem and related factors, and
3. to provide the basis for monitoring the situation in NSW over time

The target audiences and style of report

As noted, there are a variety of target audiences for these reports at state government and Area Health service level including:

- Senior public health planners and policy makers;
- Nutrition strategy and program planners in the NSW Health system;
- Health promotion and public health workforce;
- Monitoring/surveillance groups in NSW Health;
- Food and nutrition research groups with an interest in population nutrition
- Private sector, non-government, and other government stakeholders in the priority nutrition issues

Because of the non-specialist (in nutrition) nature of most of the target audience groups, it is crucial to minimise and to explain essential technical jargon, spell out clearly the recommendations in current dietary policies, and interpret the data in a user-friendly manner to convey a clear story supporting action on the priority area.

The report should include simplified tables/graphs and commentary on each. If complex tables are essential as back up they should be included in appendices.

A Framework for identifying relevant information for monitoring reports

Typically, the types of information that decision-makers and others use for the purposes identified includes:

- the size of the problem, e.g. of overweight and obesity, or of under consumption of vegetables and fruit,
- population groups most affected
- the burden of illness attributable to the particular nutrition problems
- the economic costs attributable to the nutrition problem
- the key determinants/influences on the problem
- how the situation is changing.

A framework can be useful for identifying/focusing/ordering the range of information available and relevant for describing the situation relevant to each priority issue. The conceptual framework which follows (Appendix 1) was developed by the Australian Food and Nutrition Monitoring Unit, to guide selection and development of national public health nutrition indicators and the presentation of information relevant to these (Marks et al 2001).

The framework is based on the concept of an 'outcomes hierarchy' approach to describing program logic (King, 1996 and Nutbeam 1996.) and corresponding information that can be used to assess the effects of health promotion/nutrition interventions. Because 'actions' and interventions are the focus of monitoring, a framework that is based on the 'outcomes' of actions is appropriate, even though the enhanced actions that may result from the new strategy have not yet been designed.

Usually, the lower levels of the hierarchy relate to action by the health and nutrition sector, while mid-levels relate intermediate outcomes, such as consumer attitudes, actions, and habits, while upper levels relate to biomedical and health outcomes of the intended beneficiaries of the policy or program.

The choice of which level(s) of the hierarchy to monitor over time depends to a large extent on the objectives of policies, strategies and programs, the requirements for accountability and the availability of information. For example, to monitor the outcomes of a new policy to promote greater provision of fruit and vegetables in food services, the focus would need to be on monitoring the actual availability of these foods at selected outlets. Because food consumption is affected by many variables, monitoring changes in fruit and vegetable consumption would not be likely to show differences in the short term from this intervention. However, over time, it would be expected that interventions in an Area Health Service will reach a large segment of the intended population and that changes in consumption should be detectable, if the efforts have been effective. Information about food consumption is generally more easily available from various sources, than information about food availability/access.

For the purposes of the special issue monitoring reports, as defined above, concentration on the middle to top levels of the hierarchy are required to document the size of the problem in terms of food and nutrient consumption, biomedical markers of poor health, and the extent of ill-health attributable to the problem. However, information about the key determinants, at the lower levels of the hierarchy can suggest areas for action and vigilance.

Considerations in selecting information for inclusion in the monitoring reports

The information to be included in the monitoring reports should:

- Relate to as many levels of the hierarchy as possible
- Be NSW specific, where possible, but if not available, inclusion of Australian or international information is preferable to leaving a major gap in a level of the hierarchy. Information about attributable fractions for nutrition, and evidence confirming higher risks of problems among particular target groups will, of course, be drawn from the literature, rather than NSW specific data.
- Be Area Health Service specific, where representative population data are available, to provide an “off the shelf resource”, that is without having to duplicate the work in preparing another version of the report with Area-specific information.
- Be representative of NSW, or a defined geographic area. Exceptions might be where data are available from a special study of a particular setting that illustrate a problem or data that might be useful to collect locally, e.g. fruit and vegetable availability at convenience stores or take-away food shops in one local neighbourhood.
- Include key sources that are routinely collected, that is, are repeated, so that trends can be documented.
- Include information about previous trends, where comparable information is available.
- Be based on valid, standardised and consistent measurement methods, particularly for data comparisons across Area Health Services, or over time
- Come from reputable sources, e.g. Epi Branch, Public Health Units, research groups with demonstrated track records in the area, published work in peer reviewed journals, etc.. For industry-related data, an evaluation of quality should be made consulting a few key agencies.
- Are free or low-cost to obtain

Description of key data sources

Readers of the reports/users of the information may require further information about the survey or study methods for key data sources used in the report.

A brief summary of the survey/study methods should be included in the appendices of each special issue monitoring report. Information to be included should comprise: the year the study survey was undertaken, the auspicing agency, the sample frame, sample size and response rates for the various components of the study, the types of information collected, the methods used to measure the food/nutrition/physical activity or other variables reported.

the range of relevant information available, the publications where information can be obtained, linkages to the National Food and Nutrition Data Sources Catalogue and/or where further detail about survey methods can be obtained.

References

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A conceptual framework for monitoring Public Health Nutrition Indicators in Australia

