

**Submission
No 19**

IMPROVING ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT CHECKS

Organisation: Dietitians Australia

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Inquiry into improving access to early childhood health and development checks

**Response to consultation
February 2024**

Recipient

Committee on Community Services, Parliament of New South Wales
communityservices@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dietitians Australia contact

Vanessa Schuldt, Senior Policy Officer
[REDACTED]

Dietitians Australia acknowledges all traditional custodians of the lands, waters and seas that we work and live on across Australia. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and future and thank them for their continuing custodianship.

The leading voice in nutrition and dietetics
A PO Box 2087 Woden ACT 2606 | T 02 6189 1200
E info@dietitiansaustralia.org.au | W dietitiansaustralia.org.au
Dietitians Association of Australia | ABN 34 008 521 480
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About Dietitians Australia

Dietitians Australia is the national association of the dietetic profession with over 8,400 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 are the qualified and credentialed food and nutrition experts and play a variety of important roles during the early years to support children and their carers to obtain optimal nutrition to achieve the best start to life.

This submission was prepared by staff and members of Dietitians Australia following the [Conflict of Interest Management Policy](#).

Recommendations

In response to the following inquiry Terms of Reference:

- **Recruitment and retention of health professionals to address workforce shortages; and**
- **Funding for early intervention programs and screening to ensure children are given support for developmental issues, including telehealth and other models:**

Ensure NSW government funding enables early intervention and screening programs to include Accredited Practising Dietitian services to:

- ensure children and their carers are given support to optimise nutrition intakes for early childhood growth and development;
- assist multidisciplinary teams in the dietary management of children with dietary concerns (including but not limited to children with disability) identified through screening; and
- train staff conducting screening to look for markers of suboptimal nutrition and nutrition risk (beyond weight, height and growth trajectories).

Discussion

The information that follows is in response to two inquiry Terms of Reference:

- Recruitment and retention of health professionals to address workforce shortages; and
- Funding for early intervention programs and screening to ensure children are given support for developmental issues, including telehealth and other models:

Pivotal role of nutrition in the early years

Pregnancy and the early years of life are a time of rapid growth and neurodevelopment. A nutritious diet is a significant factor contributing to the health and wellbeing of developing foetuses, infants, toddlers and children.

Nutrition plays a pivotal role in influencing the expression of an unborn baby's genetic make-up during a woman's pre-natal stage, as well as brain development, cognitive function and physical ability in the first years of life.¹⁻³ Given the exponential growth and development during this period, there are high nutritional requirements. Optimal nutrition during this period is imperative for growth, development, and immediate and long-term disease prevention.¹⁻⁷

Optimal nutrition for infants and children continues to fall short of nutrition targets in Australia. For example:

- Exclusive breastfeeding rates at 6 months in Australia are not meeting national and international targets. The National Health and Medical Research Council's infant feeding guidelines recommend exclusive breastfeeding to around 6 months of age, yet in 2022 barely two in five (37.5%) infants were exclusively breastfed at 6 months.⁸
- Many children during the early years are not meeting dietary recommendations for core food groups, particularly vegetables.⁹ The 2022 National Health Survey revealed that for children aged 2-3 years, just 20.1% met recommended vegetable intakes of 2.5 serves per day.⁹

Nutrition is important in shaping lifelong nutrition and health outcomes and disease prevention. Poor nutrition and related outcomes are known to track from infancy through to childhood and adulthood.⁷ During these early years, food preferences are developed and it is a critical period to establish lifelong healthy relationships with food and dietary patterns.⁷

Research conducted in Australia provides an overview of the policy mechanisms, evidence support and stakeholder perspectives on opportunities to improve nutrition across the first 2000 days of life (conception to 5 years), to guide future investments and inform policy dialogues with relevant government, non-government and external agencies within Victoria, Australia.¹⁰ Thematic analysis (qualitative data analysis) of interviews revealed three key themes: (1) continuity of care from pre-conception to childcare; (2) consistency and strengthening of early years nutrition messages; and (3) capacity for early years nutrition initiatives. The findings, which have applicability in other jurisdictions including New South Wales, show that more joined-up action and greater program and policy coherence is required. Furthermore, funding to facilitate the delivery of coordinated and integrated services to address nutrition across the first 2000 days of life is also required.¹⁰

Funding for dietetic services

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are important members of the multidisciplinary team who support infants and children to achieve the best start in life. APDs are skilled to provide support across the early years in many ways, such as:

- Provide expert nutrition and dietary advice – APDs are recognised professionals with the qualifications and skills to provide expert nutrition and dietary advice to individuals (and their carers) across the lifespan. APDs are qualified to provide nutrition advice appropriate for every age and stage (e.g. maternal diet manipulation, breastfeeding support, infant formula advice, guidance on the introduction of solids, strategies for fussy eating, management of food allergies/intolerances and much more).^{11,12}
- Provide nutrition therapy for people with disability – APDs are skilled to manage food, nutrition and eating challenges for children with disability, where nutrition impacts developmental milestones, functional capacity and quality of life.^{12,13}
- Develop and deliver nutrition education and training for communities, early childhood services and health professionals.¹³

- Develop and deliver public health nutrition programs and policies.¹¹

State and territory governments have a key role to play in improving access to APDs as part of early childhood health and development checks, such as through a commitment of publicly funded positions for dietitians in early intervention and screening programs, and access to dietitians via telehealth for people living in rural and remote locations. State and territory government grants to incentivise final year dietetic students to work in regional and rural areas upon their course completion is another means to improve access to APDs.

The role of federal government funding and initiatives, such as dedicated Medicare items enabling access to APDs during pregnancy and infancy, funding for APD services via telehealth consultations and funding for APDs in NDIS plans, must be acknowledged as key to supporting any state/territory funding and initiatives.

Good nutrition during pregnancy and early childhood plays a foundational role in enabling children to grow, learn and thrive. Given the critical role of nutrition during the early years, Dietitians Australia considers it vital that NSW government funding enables early intervention and screening programs to include Accredited Practising Dietitian services to:

- ensure children and their carers are given support to optimise nutrition intakes for early childhood growth and development;
- assist multidisciplinary teams in the management of children with dietary concerns (including but not limited to children with disability) identified through screening; and
- train staff conducting screening to look for markers of suboptimal nutrition and nutrition risk (beyond weight, height and growth trajectories).

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