



38th National Nutrient Databank Conference

Key players of the Australian food composition program

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Abstract

This review aims to document the development of the food composition program in Australia with particular focus on the enablers and barriers to its progress. A process of reference harvesting and unstructured telephone interviewing was conducted with experts noted in the identified references. Academics, nutritionists, dietitians and food chemists who also played pivotal roles in its development, through fluctuating funding levels and varied influence from overseas, particularly the US and UK. Australia's food composition tables have not developed in isolation but have continued to evolve in line with international developments in nutrition science and with changes in data publication methods.

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1. Introduction

Food composition within Australia has been shaped over time by a number of key players including food industry, government bodies, food scientists, nutritionists and dietitians. The dietitians were the most heavily involved during the early developmental years though have remained on the outskirts of progress during the last two decades (1990s and 2000s).

The Australian food composition program began its early work with the 1938 release of the 5th report of the National Health and Medical Council (NHMRC), a national body for health and medical research, containing a list of foods analyzed for their macronutrient composition. Over time, the common theme impacting the program has been

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a lack of funding to support a dedicated analytical program. The work of a number of food scientists, dietitians and nutritionists has helped to shape the program to where it is presently many of whom are the focus of this review. The early history of the Australian program was documented and published in 1981 by Dr Joan Woodhill though since this time a number of significant changes have occurred warranting an update. The aim of this review is to document a historic account of the persons playing an influential role in the development of the Australian food composition program since 1970.

Nomenclature

AGAL: Australian Government Analytical Laboratory
ANDB: Australian Nutrient Databank
ANZFA: Australia New Zealand Food Authority
AUSNUT: Australian Nutrient Tables
CoFA: Composition of Foods Australia
CSIRO: Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
FSANZ: Food Standards Australia New Zealand
HPLC: High Pressure Liquid Chromatography
NHMRC: National Health and Medical Research Council
NFA: National Food Authority
NUTTAB: Nutrient Tables
PNG: Papua New Guinea
UNSW: University of New South Wales.

2. Method of review

A detailed overview of the organizations that were involved in the program since its early beginnings has been published elsewhere.¹ The approach used for this review draws on the published methods. In summary, a multi-method approach was employed including:

- 1) Reference harvesting of Australian food composition tables and conference reports;
- 2) Systematic search of an archival database of Australian dietetics;
- 3) Review of meeting minutes and archival records of key government organizations related to tables and reports harvested in 1;
- 4) Review of meeting minutes of professional organizations with a nutrition focus;
- 5) Expert consultation via interview with persons named in any documents obtained in 1-4.

Interviews were approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Wollongong and all interviewed participants provided verbal informed consent prior to participation. The following provides a chronological overview of the work performed by the key players whilst they contributed to the Australian food composition program.

3. Results/Discussion

3.1. Growth of the Australian program: 1970-1980

Heather Greenfield, a nutrition scientist by training, noted the presence of predominantly Australian food in retail outlets while working in Papua New Guinea (PNG) in 1972-74. She also noted the lack of tables for Papua New Guinea (a situation that still prevails today). Greenfield subsequently contacted Margaret Corden (1918-1999), senior nutritionist of the Commonwealth Department of Health in Canberra from 1963 to 1978, for the Australian food tables.

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