

A call for more research that enhances public health nutrition practice

Public health nutrition practice can be simply categorised to include three interrelated but distinct spheres of activity, including analysis, capacity building and intervention management. This is clearly a simplification of practice that in reality is quite complicated and diverse, but serves in this Editorial to help make a point about the need for research in under-represented areas of the discipline of public health nutrition. Through analytical practice we are striving to describe and understand the problems in our communities, identify determinants of problems so that we can focus interventions, and evaluate if interventions effectively contribute to problem resolution. Much of the research in this journal can be broadly categorised in this sphere of practice. In the current issue, Sanigorski *et al.*¹ provide further evidence linking sweetened beverages with obesity in Australian schoolchildren, Xu *et al.*² describe infant feeding practices and determinants in China and Nguyen *et al.*³ describe the relationship between socio-economic status and overweight in Vietnam. This sample from articles in this issue demonstrates research that explores public health nutrition issues and determinants.

Few readers of this journal will disagree with a view that more research is needed that supports improvements in public health nutrition intervention effectiveness. By this I refer to research that answers questions such as 'did the intervention bring about changes in outcomes and determinants', 'by how much', 'why' and 'in what contexts'? This includes sharing our learning and evidence from ineffective as well as effective interventions. Developing, implementing and evaluating interventions is a core function of most practising public health nutritionists and there is a large range of strategies and innovations being applied worldwide. Unfortunately, relatively very little of this innovation and strategy implementation is evaluated and then shared through publication. In this issue a number of papers are published that fall within this category of practice research. Wrieden *et al.*'s paper⁴ reporting on the impact of a community-based food skills intervention is another example of the intervention research required that can inform and advance more effective practice.

A much less frequently reported sphere of public health nutrition practice is that relating to capacity building,

sometimes described as the invisible work of health promotion. Capacity building involves the work we do in practice to enhance the ability of individuals, groups, organisations and communities to achieve their goals and objectives (such as obesity prevention or optimal infant feeding; common paper themes in this issue). It can range from developing networks, up-skilling the workforce and empowering communities through engagement in decision-making to mobilising and allocating resources. We do this in practice to varying degrees, but we rarely evaluate and share our work in this area in a scholarly manner. I contend that this is a major weakness in the intelligence base we currently have in public health nutrition to inform more effective practice.

This journal has as a stated interest in papers that share experiences about the development, implementation and evaluation of programmes of work aimed at improving health. This improves organised effort to build capacity to ensure that interventions are effective and have sustainable effects. So, this is a call to practitioners and researchers in this field to disseminate your practice research through this medium. In doing so, we can enhance the intelligence base on which we can develop more effective practice.

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References

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- 4 Wrieden WL, Anderson AS, Longbottom PJ, Valentine K, Stead M, Caraher M, *et al.* The impact of a community-based food skills intervention on cooking confidence, food preparation methods and dietary choices – an exploratory trial. *Public Health Nutrition* 2007; **10**(2): 203–11.