



Policy Portion

Supplying fresh food to remote Indigenous communities

Poor nutrition in early life is associated with poor health (including chronic disease) in later life. This risk is especially real for people in remote areas, because of the logistical difficulty of getting fresh food there at affordable prices. The challenge is particularly acute for Indigenous people living in remote communities that often have very poor infrastructure and limited local economic opportunities. For some of them poor access to food and poor nutrition continue throughout life.

This is not something that affects just a small number. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise about 26% of the total population of remote areas of nearly 500,000 people. Poor nutrition contributes to a high prevalence of chronic disease and plays a significant role in determining the 17-year difference in lifespan between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other Australians.



'Food security' is a term that focuses on access at all times to the food needed for a healthy life. This means access to a range of quality and nutritious foods with assured supply and at a reasonable cost. The barriers to such an assured supply of fresh food include geographic isolation, seasonal climatic conditions, the cost of transport over long distances on poor roads, and poor food handling and storage conditions.

A significant improvement in food security is an essential element in addressing remote people's health inequality. It is the subject of a multifaceted investment through the National Public Health Partnership's National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan - Eat Well Australia, 2000-2010 (NATSINSAP).

This Policy Portion is based on the Alliance's Position Paper, "Food security for Indigenous people in remote areas" (2006). Copies of that full report are available from <http://www.ruralhealth.org.au/nrhpublic/index.cfm>, by contacting the National Rural Health Alliance on 02 6285 4660 or by emailing nrha@ruralhealth.org.au

Why this is important to people in rural and remote Australia

Good nutrition is essential to good health. Lack of reliable access to fresh food compromises health and contributes to chronic disease.

Reliable and secure food supply is taken for granted by most Australians. However this is not the case for many people living in remote Australia. Long transport distances and seasonal climatic conditions create challenges and add costs to food supply. On occasions, food must be air-freighted into some isolated communities at huge additional expense. Food transport and storage are sometimes not well done, so food quality at the point of purchase may be poor.

The Alliance seeks to raise awareness of the problems with food security and in so doing to bring about further improvements in food supply and nutrition in remote Australia.

Basis and evidence

The evidence of poor nutrition in remote Australia is stark. For example, in one study 20% of children under two years old in the Top End of the Northern Territory were found to have malnutrition. In another, Aboriginal children aged between one and five admitted to hospital were 120 times more likely to be diagnosed with malnutrition than others of the same age. In Western Australia, a survey of nutritional indicators found that only 35.9% of Indigenous children ate sufficient vegetables. Diabetes and obesity are both higher in prevalence and earlier in onset in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Poor nutrition is a factor in both these problems.

Between 400,000 and 500,000 people (2-3% of the population) live in remote Australia, which covers about 80% of the country. By Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) definitions, remote areas are described as having 'very restricted access to goods [and] services....' Very remote areas are described as being 'locationally disadvantaged, very little access to goods [and] services....' It is estimated that 26% of people living in remote Australia are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

In addition to the challenges of a secure food supply, the price of food rises with increasing remoteness. Income in remote areas is lower than elsewhere; a report on one remote region found that 80% of Aboriginal people have incomes of less than \$20,000 compared with 42% of non-Aboriginal people. Estimates of the extra cost of a 'market basket' of foods range from 30% to nearly 160% for remote communities compared with their respective capital cities.

A further risk to food security is inadequate 'health hardware', the equipment and resources necessary to safely store and prepare foods in the home, including refrigerators, potable water supply and waste management, and other resources for safe food preparation.

These factors contribute to poor nutrition and to poor health, from child and maternal health right through adulthood.

Healthy Horizons – A Health Framework for Rural, Regional and Remote Australians (2003 – 2007) espouses seven goals. The first is to improve highest priorities first, and the second is to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples living in rural, regional and remote Australia. Demonstrable improvement in food security and associated factors would enable progress to be made towards both these goals.

Recommendations

In order to improve the situation, the Alliance recommends the following actions.

1. Government and non-government agencies should recognise the complex arrangements necessary for food supply and consumption in remote communities, and promote whole-of-government measures to improve the infrastructure, systems and attitudes that affect them.
2. There need to be greater investments in systems that ensure compliance with food safety and transport regulations, and in the monitoring of such systems. Work in these areas would include attention to management of the 'cold chain' for perishable foodstuffs from production to consumption.
3. There should be additional Commonwealth investment in employment and upskilling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers to enable them to have a greater influence on food security and to address health promotion and nutrition at the local level.
4. There needs to be urgent consideration of ways to improve health hardware in homes in remote communities, including through investment at the local level in environmental health field support (ie the training, employment and resourcing of specialised workers).
5. Improved surveillance in remote communities would help to ensure that water standards, including potable water supply and 'grey water' management, are comparable to those for urban households.
6. There should be a national program to improve and support the management and commercial skills of people involved with remote community stores.
7. Further investment should be made in the development of local community and family skills related to the purchasing, storage and preparation of food.
8. Governments, media and the public should be encouraged to see community stores as an essential part of the infrastructure of remote settlements.

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