



22 November 2019

Prevention and Population Health Branch  
Department of Health and Human Services  
The State Government of Victoria

Dear colleagues,

### **Recommendations for healthy foods in public hospitals and aged care**

We are writing as a collective of current and future medical doctors and dietitians who are committed to contribute to your review of the urgent improvements needed in the food and drink options within the health facilities of Victoria. We applaud the commitment of the Victorian Government to ensuring our public hospitals and public sector residential aged care services serve healthy, high quality and where possible, locally sourced food. We thank you for the opportunity to respond to your revision of these health and quality food standards.

To improve health outcomes, health equity, and reduce the financial burden on the state's healthcare system, it is critical that all food served in state-run settings is health-promoting to the standard of the best currently available medical evidence. In addition, food served should not be directly harmful to human health, as conclusively acknowledged by leading medical bodies. Ideally too, food provided that strongly favours environmental sustainability should be a decisive factor in product procurement and menu planning.

Human health, our healthcare system, and our environment are all in a state of crisis. Dietary risks are one of the most significant contributing factors to the burden of disease and premature death in Australia<sup>1</sup>. The leading cause of death in most western countries, including Australia, is cardiovascular disease<sup>2</sup>. Evidence indicates that this is a largely preventable disease, which can be mitigated and even reversed on a low fat whole food plant-based diet<sup>3</sup>.

Nurturing evidence-based eating patterns must be a priority for the Department of Health to enable individuals from all backgrounds to have the best chance of a healthy life. Individuals who have experienced an adverse health event are often more open to lifestyle modifications. Evidence suggests that behavioural change related to nutrition can be supported by an environment conducive to the accessibility, convenience and affordability of healthier



choices<sup>4</sup>. This includes the consistent provision of healthy options in hospitals and public sector residential aged care facilities that are made available at every mealtime.

The recent EAT–Lancet Commission on sustainable food systems stated that, “a diet rich in plant-based foods and with fewer animal-source foods confers both improved health and environmental benefits”.<sup>5</sup> The New Zealand Ministry of Health has also recommended reducing meat and dairy in their recent report, ‘Sustainability and the health sector’.<sup>6</sup>

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) has declared climate change a health emergency. Agriculture is a significant contributor to greenhouse gases. The AMA’s 2018 Nutrition Position Statement acknowledges the health benefits of whole food plant-based nutrition, and recommends that hospitals and other residential healthcare facilities should provide access to plant-based meals. A higher availability and range of plant-based meals influences people to eat less meat, reducing the environmental impact of food choices.<sup>7</sup>

Hospitals and regional leaders are now implementing plant-based policies, such as the vegetarian Loma Linda University Medical Centre (California, USA) and the 14 global cities which signed up to the C40 Good Food City Declaration.

### **Our recommendations**

We urge the Department of Health to adopt specific, evidence-based recommendations as follows:

- Patient and staff menus should be centered on minimally processed fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes.
- Whole food plant-based meal options should be available at every meal time for patients and the public.
- Processed meats should be phased out from menus, due to the classification by the World Health Organization and the International Agency for Research on Cancer as a Class 1 (definite human) carcinogen.<sup>8</sup>
- Active steps should be taken to reduce meat, eggs and dairy provided within health facilities. This includes offering dairy-free alternatives, such as soy milk, wherever dairy milk is available.
- Deep fryers and deep fried food should be phased out.
- Vending machines and cafeterias in Victorian healthcare settings should also be aligned with the provision of all of the above.



Selected references are listed below and a wider evidence summary on the benefits of plant-based nutrition is available on request. Further chronic disease-specific related nutrition information can also be found on the [Doctors For Nutrition website](#).

We welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss how Victoria could transform health outcomes for our population, benefit from healthcare expenditure savings and become national nutrition leaders through this proactive initiative.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Heleen Roex on behalf of [Doctors For Nutrition](#) and Australian Plant-Based Medical Students.



## References

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