

7 Family and community health

General practitioners

There are over 28,000 general practitioners in Australia, and over 90 per cent of the population see a general practitioner at least once each year. Many general practitioner consultations deal with children and families, so there is great potential for the provision of advice about healthy eating in general practice.

Some impediments that reduce the potential role of general practitioners in promoting children's healthy eating include:

- limited time for extended consultations, given that fee-for-service conditions under which most general practitioners operate
- the general paucity of nutrition and nutrition promotion education at medical school, which means general practitioners have limited preparation for activities in this area

- the strong emphasis on treatment (often via day therapies) rather than the prevention of disease and the promotion of health, despite increasing evidence of the efficiency of nutrition and physical activity interventions in the prevention of disease.

Nevertheless, many doctors and allied health staff have strong interests in the provision of nutrition counselling for families (Helman 1985; Worsley and Worsley 1990). Medical Director (a medical software company) has begun to provide nutrition information modules for general practitioners and staff in community health centres, and these modules have been well received. These information technology services enable staff and their patients to access www.healthyeatingclub.com, which provides dietary and nutrition information for patients.

Community health centres

Community health centres provide a broad range of medical and social services (often incorporating elements of general practice). They are often sited in areas of social disadvantage and have strong networks with other community organisations such as women's and Indigenous people's groups, and food banks. The following are among the advantages of community health centres in the promotion of children's healthy eating:

- They are located within communities.
- They often have active outreach programs—for example, the ability to link with schools, food outlets and community centres.
- They have skilled community workers on staff.
- They have service plans that are designed to respond to the needs of the community. If healthy eating promotion is identified as a need, the centres have a good opportunity to set up interventions.

The Fresh Kids program, coordinated by Dietitians at the Western Region Health Centre, in partnership with the Maribyrnong City Council and local primary schools, is a successful example of an initiative sustained at the local level (Figures 9 & 10). Further examples of community nutrition programs for children can be found at www.health.gov.au/pubhlth/strateg/childnutrition.htm, A report on the opportunities for food and nutrition activities in local government can be found at www.health.gov.au/pubhlth/publicat/document/nutrit.pdf.