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Consumer engagement for a public health guideline – benefits of early consultation

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Background/Purpose: In 2008 NHMRC commenced revision of its *Dietary Guidelines*. The *Dietary Guidelines* provide Australia with authoritative nutrition advice and underpin government nutrition policy. Users include consumers, health/food industry, educational institutions, non-government organisations and government policy-makers.

Historically, NHMRC seeks input at public consultation, after the guideline is drafted. However due to high levels of interest in the *Dietary Guidelines*, NHMRC undertook consultation from the beginning of the review program.

Method:

1. Open invitation consumer meetings, advertised by letter and email and widely distributed through nutrition networks, were held nationally to provide information on the program and NHMRC's guideline development process.
2. A website was released to present information on the program and act as an open site for consumer consultation opportunities.
3. A survey was undertaken between April-September 2009 to collect current usage information on the *Dietary Guidelines*, and feedback and suggestions for the revised guidelines. Letters were sent to 84 user groups, particularly those with a nutrition focus, requesting similar information.

Results: NHMRC has received positive feedback from the consultations. There was good attendance at the information meetings (n=110) and the survey has had 385 respondents to date.

Identified trends include:

- support for an interactive computer format,
- need for improved clarity, and
- support for accompanying materials to be tailored to separate user groups.

Discussion: The *Dietary Guidelines* are NHMRC's most popular guidelines. Consultation has raised awareness of the review program and provided tangible input opportunities for consumers. In particular the survey results will inform the format and presentation of the revised guidelines.

For maximum impact public health guidelines need to be widely adopted, including government to inform policy, and health professionals to provide advice. Consultation has increased NHMRC's direct relationships with consumers. Early "buy-in" should result in greater uptake and implementation of the revised *Dietary Guidelines*.

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