

[Australia]

Food Safety*¹

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Australia faces some serious challenges if we are to ensure the safety and supply of quality food and water.

When it comes to food and food safety, one of the problems for the vast majority of Australians is knowing which foods and drinks, and in what amounts, are appropriate and which are not. This is especially so in today’s world of myriad food choices and confusing messages and marketing.

That this is why simple, informative food labelling, such as the Health Star Rating, is crucially important to people’s health. The HSR system provides simple but prominent, information about how healthy the product is. It allows for quick and easy comparisons, and ideally assist people to make healthier choices. Food labelling is about promoting health and health awareness, as well as protecting public safety.

Despite having a fairly robust system in place, Australia has experienced problems with food safety.

Following an outbreak of hepatitis A that was linked to frozen berries imported from China, the Australian Government announced plans for clearer food country of origin labelling. Previous attempts to tighten food labelling standards had met with strong resistance from Australian food manufacturers, who complained that making changes would add significantly to production costs. Despite this apparent burden on food manufacturers, Australian consumers have come to expect strong food safety measures.

Food labelling and country of origin labelling will make it easier for people to make healthy and informed choices about their food and drink consumption.

The AMA has also been outspoken about the health impacts of climate change and in particular, the consequences on Australia’s food and

water resources.

There is considerable evidence that governments must plan for the major impacts of climate change, especially for extreme weather events, the spread of diseases and the possible disruption to supplies of food and water.

The health effects of climate change will include increased heat-related illness and deaths, increased food and water borne diseases, and changing patterns of diseases. The incidence of conditions such as malaria, diarrhoea, and cardio-respiratory problems is likely to rise.

We also know that local changes in temperature and rainfall have altered distribution of some water-borne illnesses and disease vectors, and reduced food production for some vulnerable populations.

Food insecurity and the threat to water supply must be addressed as a changing climate in Australia is likely to reduce local food yields and quality and increase food prices. This could lead to major health issue, especially for lower-income families and remote communities where food choices are often limited.

Dietary insufficiencies, nutritional imbalances and health impairments, especially in young children, is a possible consequence of reduced food yields and increased prices.

The AMA has called on our government to show leadership in addressing climate change and the effects it is having, and will have, on human health. This must include waste management plans and water conservation.

Australia’s food and water sustainability are also at risk from fracking and the mining on prime agricultural land. There is mounting concern in Australia that fracking and coal seam gas mining will erode agricultural land production and potentially contaminate some water suppliers.

*¹ This article is based on a presentation made at the Symposium “Ensuring Food Safety: An Important Challenge Today” held at the 30th CMAAO General Assembly and 51st Council Meeting, Yangon, Myanmar, on September 23-25, 2015.

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