

# Nutritionists must take a bigger piece of the pie when it comes to influencing food policy

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Nutrition professionals need to step up to the plate and gain a larger portion of influence on food policy in Australia to dilute the heavy concentration of 'food industry' representatives with direct links to food policy decision makers.

QUT PhD researcher Katherine Cullerton, from QUT's Faculty of Health, found that nutrition professionals, scientists and other public interest bodies tended to stay on the sidelines in national nutrition policy-making while the [food industry](#) takes the floor.

Her network analysis of policy influencers (published in *Obesity Reviews*) showed that the food industry had both more and higher level access points to policymakers than nutrition professionals and therefore had the greatest capacity to influence policy.

"My analysis shows that nutrition professionals have limited direct links to 'decision makers' and the 'food industry' holds the strategic high ground in advocating their interests to policymakers," Ms Cullerton said.

"Manufactured food companies are powerful players and fund the Australian Food and Grocery Council and the Australian Beverage Association which are highly professional in lobbying and maintain the greatest capability to influence policy.

"Australia has been languishing without a cohesive national nutrition policy since 1992 that would coordinate nutrition initiatives based on the

latest evidence to improve the nutritional status of Australians.

"This situation has been allowed to continue when other countries are undertaking policy action to protect their citizens against dangerous levels of salt, sugar, fat in food to combat obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

"Instead we have had 'self-regulation' by the food industry lobby whose vested interest has helped ensure no national nutrition policy that could save thousands of lives from poor diets and millions of healthcare dollars."

Ms Cullerton said that in order to decrease obesity and chronic disease we needed population-wide approaches, such as a sugar-sweetened beverage tax.

"We need such measures as a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, which is a no-brainer, if we want to reduce obesity and diabetes type-2 and regulation of salt in processed food to lower [heart disease](#) and stroke.

"Mexico, France, Hungary, several states in the USA have all decreased consumption of sugary drinks and increased water intake through government mandate.

"Nutrition professionals must step up and lobby for a tax on sugar-sweetened drinks that could then be used to subsidise healthy food."

Ms Cullerton also said front-of-pack-food labelling should be made mandatory.

"The current system of stars to indicate [healthy food choices](#) is not perfect but it's better than nothing but it is voluntary in that the food industry can pick and choose which products use the star system," she

said.

"The star system was developed with the food industry which generally gets to call the shots.

Ms Cullerton said nutrition professionals could learn from the food industry on how to be better lobbyists and consequently better influence nutrition policy in Australia.

**More information:** K. Cullerton et al. Exploring power and influence in nutrition policy in Australia, *Obesity Reviews* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/obr.12459](https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.12459)

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