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**Submission from the Dietitians Association of Australia
Inquiry into remote community stores in Aboriginal and Torres Strait
communities**

The Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) is the national association of the dietetic profession with over 3700 members, and branches in each state and territory. DAA is a leader in nutrition and advocates for better food, better health, and better living for all.

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DAA appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry by the House of Representatives Standing committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs into the operation of local community stores in remote Indigenous communities. DAA commends the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs for investigating the important role that remote stores have in contributing to the health and well being of their communities.

This paper provides a summary of the DAA response to this inquiry. This is followed by detailed general comments, and specific comments addressing the points being considered by the inquiry.

Summary

DAA believes that:

- o Food security is a basic human right to be enjoyed by all Australians.
- o Measures must be taken to address gaps between food availability and intake which persist due to poverty in remote communities despite implementation of best business practice.
- o A commitment by government to food and nutrition monitoring and surveillance is required.
- o Remote stores provide an important service to the community.
- o Remote stores have an important role in the health of the community.

- Nutrition is core business, and dietitians/nutritionists should be employed on a continuing basis to operationalise nutrition policy.
- Nutrition performance measures are important in evaluating success of new models.
- Income quarantine schemes may be appropriate in some communities
- Group models rather than independent stores may provide benefits to the communities.
- Monitoring and evaluation of programs and new store models is essential.
- Managing the relationships between stores and communities is important.
- Infrastructure for stores should be included in funding models, including housing for store managers.

General comments

Food security is a human right

DAA believes that food security is a basic human right to be enjoyed by all Australians¹. DAA is concerned that all Australians on low incomes are likely to be food insecure because of the disparity between the cost of energy dense nutrient poor foods and more nutritious foods^{2,3,4}. It is expected that the connection between poverty, food insecurity and obesity that has been described in other countries^{5,6} is also apparent in Australia. However, the situation is worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote areas because the difference in cost of healthy food compared to less healthy food are exacerbated by cost factors resulting from distance from main centres and the high overheads associated with operating a remote store for a small population. These additional cost pressures impact on Australians with the least capacity of any Australians to purchase food, whose traditional, locally sourced and nutritious food resources have been largely lost as a consequence of the European settlement of Australia.

Data to support evaluation and research

DAA would like to see a commitment to regular and comprehensive food and nutrition monitoring and surveillance in Australia for the benefit of all Australians, and specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as recommended in the FoodNorth report⁷. There are particular challenges in achieving this in remote areas where there are currently gaps in data related to the monitoring of food pricing, food and nutrient intake, nutrition indicators and health outcomes. However the introduction of computerised business systems now found in most remote stores, presents a unique opportunity to address these issues. Such systems, when combined with nutrition indicators, may provide rich data to evaluate individual store performance to feed back to communities. The Remote Indigenous Stores and Takeaways (RIST)⁸ project funded Menzies School of Health Research to develop an electronic system designed to analyse and report on store sales data, called 'Keeping Track of Healthy Food' which can be used for this purpose. This research may also provide

data to guide the development of store governance models and contribute to the limited national data pool on nutrition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Further funding is required to support this work.

Stores are a service, not just a business

DAA believes that remote stores provide an important service to the community in the same manner as water supplies, health services and schools, and that this is as important as commercial objectives. DAA recognises the importance of the implementation of best practice business principles to encourage remote stores to achieve self generated financial viability and sustainability. However, while efficiencies may be made, independence may be unrealistic in some communities given the low income levels and the significant cost burden of running remote stores. Consequently funding support may be appropriate to underpin some stores.

Stores are part of the answer to better health

Stores have number of roles in remote communities, including health. DAA believes that it is important to see efforts to improve remote stores in the context of other efforts to improve the health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan (NATSINSAP)⁹ provides excellent direction in this and DAA would like to see continuing funding for coordination and leadership in the implementation of NATSINSAP provided by the NATSINSAP project officer(s). Other important initiatives are expanded upon in the joint statement by DAA and PHAA on Food security for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples¹. (see attachment)

Food supply, quality, cost and competition issues

Income quarantining for food

Fragile stock, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, can be a risky and costly investment by store managers due to the potential for wastage if fresh produce is not sold and has to be written off. Some managers are reluctant to carry sufficient stock because wastage can substantially affect profitability. DAA is supportive of some form of income quarantine scheme, such as food stamps or food cards being applied to social security benefits. This scheme has the advantage of ensuring that some income is spent on nutritious and healthy food. While there are valid concerns about such schemes reducing personal choice and responsibility, anecdotal information from remote communities indicates that many consumers welcome the relief such schemes give from 'humbag' or demand sharing. Quarantining of income in this way has the advantage of providing a guaranteed minimum market for healthy products for the store, and consequently improving the viability of the store. It is preferable that such schemes are developed and implemented with community consultation.

Housing for store managers

One of the costs which remote stores must meet is that of the store manager. Recruiting and retaining appropriate staff is not just a matter of providing an appropriate salary, but also of providing adequate living conditions for the store manager. Housing for teachers and health professionals is expected to be of a certain standard and it should be no different for store managers. As with other professions, it is important that Indigenous people who are interested to do so, have the opportunity to train for and undertake the position of store manager.

The effectiveness of the Outback Stores model and other private, public and community store models

Group models have advantages

Anecdotally it appears that group models, rather than independent stores, achieve lower food costs and better availability of a variety of higher quality produce for consumers. One reason for this is the capacity to negotiate on a commercial basis for better prices and rebates on products and freight to deliver better quality produce and better prices for communities. This is in contrast to freight subsidies which may benefit freight carriers but not the community.

Stores with governance involving a committee drawn from the community also appear to be more effective.

Store groups which employ dietitians/nutritionists have the advantage of expert support to develop and implement store nutrition policy and protocols and to work with manufacturers to develop nutritious products which are suitable for an otherwise small market. DAA recommends that funding support be made available to enable store groups to employ a dietitian/nutritionist and to support independent stores to also access dietetic/nutrition expertise

Nutrition is core business

DAA sees a common strength of the different store group models - Outback Stores, Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) and Retail Stores Operations - is the potential to integrate nutrition into store policy and business plans. The employment of dietitians/nutritionists on a continuing basis rather than as consultants is important in operationalising nutrition policy¹⁰. In particular dietitians/nutritionists can assist staff to build their capacity, and also to interface with remote community health professionals and health workers to improve nutrition indicators in the short term, and health outcomes in the long term in communities.

DAA believes that routine reports on nutrition performance measures for example sales of fresh fruit and vegetables are necessary to demonstrate the effectiveness of models. Some store groups already include such performance measures in their model. Another useful

strategy is to include performance incentives for store managers based on sales of healthy foods.

Managing relationships between stores and communities is important
Outback Stores manages community owned stores on behalf of the community. There are early indicators that the Outback Stores approach of funding relationship managers to build the capacity of such committees and to provide an effective interface between the store and community has been beneficial.

Other models (Retail Stores Operations and IBIS in Queensland) include those where the store group owns the stores and these models have also proved successful in providing a sustained service.

Small community owned stores which operate outside of a group setting appear to be most vulnerable to inconsistent store operations.

The impact of these factors on the health and economic outcomes of communities.

Improved food supply improves nutrition indicators

Work done in one remote community in NT^{11,12} and in another a remote community in the Kimberley¹³ in WA showed that increasing sales and thus intake of fruit and vegetables, led to a positive improvement in biochemical indicators of nutritional status. There is (unpublished) evidence from various store groups that appropriate equipment, efficient business practices and operationalising of nutrition policy in stores results in increased sales of fruits and vegetables and to healthy food choices.

While DAA supports health, education and business initiatives that promote a greater intake of healthy foods, it is concerned that continuing poverty in remote communities will limit what can be achieved, and that a ceiling will be reached where people are still unable to eat the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables compared to current Dietary Guidelines for Australians¹². Monitoring and evaluation programs will be essential to ensure that additional measures are taken to address the remaining gaps between healthy food availability and intake.

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