

Diet fads and celebrities



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Patients may need guidance to separate good nutritional science from celebrity spin.

NUTRITION has been taken out of real-world science and put into the realm of pseudoscience.

Social media and self-styled nutrition experts make it challenging to find credible nutritional advice that is backed by sound science. How do we separate the sense from the nonsense?

When the toilet is blocked, a plumber is called; when the car breaks down, we find a mechanic; but when health needs fixing, many patients turn to social media and Dr Google.

Our knowledge of the inner workings of an S-bend or an engine may be poor but, for some reason, it's assumed that, because we all experience food and create meal plans, everyone is an expert in nutrition.

One need only look at chef Pete Evans' paleo diet advice

for infants, or Sarah Wilson and David Gillespie "ridding" sugar from their diets (yet using other sweeteners in their recipes) to see how creating confusion is controversial, and big business.

The saga of Belle Gibson, who built an empire based on false claims she cured her cancer through "clean" eating and alternative lifestyle changes alone, shows how gullible people can be.

It seems all that is needed is a good gimmick then websites, apps, books, programs and sponsorships will follow.

There are common pathways to achieving nutrition celebrity status:

- Disparage conventional nutrition wisdom
- Warn of Big Food and Big Pharma conspiracies
- Tell followers it's not their fault but the fault of someone else who has conflicts of interest
- Don't mention your own conflicts of interest
- Promise a quick fix via a superfood or a super ingredient
- Pick on a nutrient (fat, sugar, carbs) or a food group (dairy, wholegrains) and suggest this is the cause of all health problems
- Throw in some nutritional and medical jargon
- Share personal success stories – yours and those of your followers

Where to find good nutrition advice

- The Smart Eating for You and the Nutrition A-Z sections of www.daa.asn.au
- Storehouse <http://storehouse.scoopnutrition.com> is an online nutrition bloggers' directory and blog aggregator. The blog feeds of 80 qualified APDs, nutrition scientists and mentored student dietitians are collated on the site.
- www.sportsdietitians.com.au
- www.nutritionaustralia.org
- www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Sites sifting spin from science:
 - www.quackwatch.com
 - www.sciencebasedmedicine.org

- Write a book and develop an app, a website, a 12-week program, a TV series, even a movie
- Interview pseudoscientists who back your claims
- Include regular sales pitches in posts to buy books, apps and programs
- Repeat the process.

So who are the real nutrition experts? Although anyone can call themselves a nutritionist, only accredited practising dietitians (APDs) are university trained over 4-6 years with bachelor or master's-level science degrees.

To maintain the APD credential, dietitians must do a reflective continuing professional development program each year of at least 30 hours.

Although Australian dietitians are not registered, they are members of a self-regulated profession

that has clear codes of professional conduct and complaints procedures.

Any dietitian providing services for Medicare, Department of Veterans' Affairs patients or health insurance rebates must be an APD.

APDs can be checked on the Dietitians Association of Australia (DAA) website (daa.asn.au/for-the-public/find-an-apd).

Dietitians who are expelled or suspended for disciplinary reasons are also listed.

Much has been written of the partnerships DAA has with food companies and the potential for conflicts of interest.

These partnerships are listed on the website. But no mention is made of the partnerships with whole food organisations such as Australian Avocados, Almond

Board of Australia, Cobram Estate olive oil, Egg Nutrition Council, Grains & Legumes Nutrition Council, Jalna Dairy Foods and Meat & Livestock Australia.

Why is helping to inform members and the public about whole food health benefits so wrong?

Dietitians are trained to review and critically analyse information and determine if it should be adopted into their own body of evidence and practice.

It's insulting to suggest that members are sheep being herded, as is often suggested.

Without additional sources of funding, members would not have access to useful services such as PEN (Practice-based Evidence in Nutrition), a global knowledge translation subscription service started by Dietitians of Canada.

DAA and the British Dietetic Association assist PEN (pennutrition.com) by organising groups of dietitians to review and translate evidence on a range of nutrition topics for subscribers.

Doctors can be confident in referring patients to APDs for medical nutrition therapy for both prevention and treatment.

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