

Coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition in major Australian newspapers, 1996-2015

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This article presents an analysis of the extent and nature of coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition issues in major Australian newspapers over the 20-year period 1996–2015. Drawing on framing and agenda-setting theories,^{1,2} we examined the relationship between reporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition issues and health policy development, as well as the stakeholder voices represented in mainstream Australian newspapers. For the purpose of this paper, we define ‘mainstream’ media as the large media organisations that communicate news stories to mass audiences.

More than two-thirds of the gap in morbidity and mortality between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians is attributable to chronic diseases.³ After smoking, diet and excess weight are the leading factors contributing to burden of disease in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. These factors are respectively responsible for 15% and 14% of the gap in health outcomes.³

Previous research has demonstrated that obesity is often framed either as a problem of individual ‘lifestyle’ or as driven by structural factors beyond the individual.⁴⁻⁶ Similarly, Islam and Fitzgerald observed that, while structural determinants were often cited in media articles about obesity in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, individual lifestyle modification was overrepresented as the solution to obesity.⁷ However, there has been no previous published research exploring media reporting

Abstract

Objective: To examine the extent and nature of coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition issues in major Australian newspapers over two decades.

Methods: Content and framing analysis of Australian newspaper articles published between 1996 and 2015 that included the terms ‘Aboriginal or Indigenous’ and ‘nutrition or diet’ in the headline and/or lead paragraph. Analysis focused on the nature of coverage, trends over time, stakeholder representation and how coverage related to policy.

Results: A total of 79 articles were included. Coverage of nutrition fluctuated over time, with peaks in 1998 and 2008. The majority of articles focused on remote Aboriginal communities. Both individual and structural representations of nutrition were used and dietary quality and food insecurity were the most commonly reported nutrition issues. Few articles employed positive representations of Aboriginal peoples. Six policy functions of articles were identified: highlighting problems; reporting government announcements; promoting programs; advocating solutions; critiquing government; and defending policy.

Conclusion: The coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition in newspapers does not reflect the diversity and strengths of Australia’s First Peoples.

Implications for public health: This study highlights the role of the media in policy advocacy; however, advocates should ensure that they do not perpetuate negative representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Key words: Indigenous health, nutrition, media analysis, policy analysis

of broader issues around nutrition among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The mass media is increasingly recognised as a key driver of public opinion and health policy in Australia.^{2,8,9} Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health is highly politicised, with policy debates often playing out in the media.¹⁰ Previous research has demonstrated that media reporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health issues is intimately related to policy development.^{10,11} Media stories can frame public and political discourse about health ‘problems’, which in turn might determine the range of policy

responses considered by government(s).¹²

Public awareness and understanding of policy issues is shaped by the way they are framed.¹ Framing has been defined as “the process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue.”^{13(p104)} Media organisations influence public perceptions of health issues by emphasising certain aspects of the issue while downplaying or omitting others.¹⁴ The media may also favour certain representations of who is responsible for the ‘problem’, how it should be addressed and the relative importance of

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different stakeholders.^{4,5} Thus, according to Searle, news articles invite readers to “share in discursively producing a version of the world”.^{15(p31)}

Understandings of ‘health’ can differ between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians. For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, health is conceptualised as “not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole Community”.¹⁶ Research from New Zealand suggests that individual/biomedical, rather than holistic/social, framing of health issues in the mainstream media may perpetuate negative stereotypes of Indigenous peoples.¹⁷

The representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health issues in the mainstream media has been shown to be overwhelmingly negative.^{18–20} Alarmist stories about alcohol, child protection and violence are favoured over less sensational topics such as heart disease, diabetes or smoking,^{18,21} which are bigger contributors to the burden of disease for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.³ Furthermore, analysis of politicians’ press releases and public statements about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health revealed that, since 1996, health issues were framed around behavioural causes and personal responsibility.^{12(p130)} This is consistent with a neoliberalist view of health,²² rather than the rights-based approach advocated by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.^{23,24} The aim of this study was to examine the extent and nature of coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition issues in major Australian newspapers between 1996 and 2015.

Methods

The sample of articles was drawn from the Factiva database (Dow Jones) collection of Australian major news sources, which comprises eleven of the top-selling newspapers in Australia (Table 1). Only print, rather than online, newspaper articles were included in the sample, as they are responsible for a substantial portion of news reporting in Australia and can be systematically retrieved through database searching. Articles published between 1 January 1996 and 31 December 2015 that included the key words ‘Aboriginal or Indigenous’ and ‘nutrition or diet’ in the headline and/or lead paragraph were

retrieved. A 20-year timeframe was selected, as it has been suggested that policy processes and stakeholder advocacy are best studied over periods of a decade or more.²⁵

To be included in the analysis, articles had to meet all of the following criteria. The article:

1. focused on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians;
2. dealt substantially with nutrition-related health issues (either on their own or as part of a holistic approach to health); and
3. appeared in the news, features, opinion or health section of the newspaper.

Articles were excluded if they were about Indigenous peoples from other countries, or if they focused on Indigenous plants and/or foods without discussing contemporary nutrition-related health issues. Included articles were analysed using a combination of content analysis²⁶ and framing analysis.^{1,13}

Content analysis

A data extraction and coding template was developed and applied to each article to extract the following information: date of publication, author, title, source, geographical focus of the article, nutrition issues covered, and stakeholder voices included. Content analysis was used to iteratively derive six policy functions from the data: highlighting problems; reporting government announcements; promoting programs; advocating solutions; critiquing government; and defending policy. This coding framework was then applied to all the articles to categorise their policy function. The time period was divided into five-year intervals to examine how the nature and extent of coverage, stakeholder views represented, and policy function of articles changed over time.

Table 1: Australian major newspapers included in search.

Newspaper	Date first available on Factiva
The Advertiser	1 December 1998
The Age	19 January 1991
The Australian Financial Review	1 September 1987
The Australian	8 July 1996
Canberra Times	3 September 1996
Courier Mail	20 January 1998
Daily Telegraph	8 July 1996
Hobart Mercury	1 April 1999
Sunday Age	27 January 1991
The Sydney Morning Herald	1 September 1986
The West Australian	2 August 1996

Framing analysis

Conceptually, framing is concerned with how language and rhetoric are used to construct social reality.¹ The framing analysis used in this study draws on Carol Bacchi’s framework,²⁷ which focuses on the ways in which stakeholders represent certain situations as “problems”; based on underlying values and worldviews, and how this representation limits the possible range of policy “solutions”. Each article was coded for how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and nutrition issues were represented. Frames were derived inductively from the texts based on examination of the language, rhetorical devices and implied meanings, values and beliefs deployed by the articles. Drawing on Bacchi’s framework,²⁷ the dominant problem representation was noted for each article as well as whether the overall framing used in the story was positive, negative or neutral.

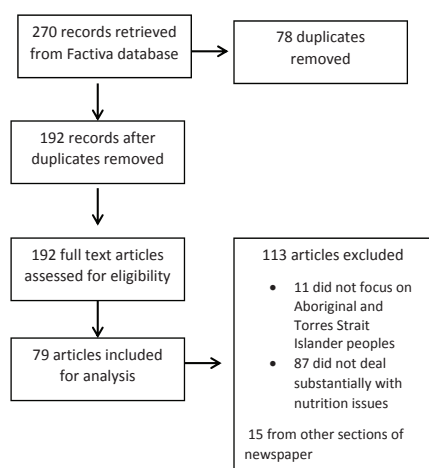
Data extraction and coding was undertaken independently by two researchers and cross-checked. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. Coding of articles regarding the framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and nutrition issues was undertaken in consultation with Aboriginal co-authors.

Results

The database search retrieved 270 newspaper articles. After duplicates were removed, 192 articles remained, which were assessed for eligibility. A total of 79 articles met all three inclusion criteria and were included for analysis (Figure 1).

The number of newspaper articles about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition fluctuated over the 21-year time period (see Figure 2). These peaks coincided with the publication of an Australian Medical Association (AMA) report on nutrition in remote Aboriginal communities and the Western Australian Aboriginal Food and Nutrition Policy in 1998 (8/11 articles) and reporting about the Northern Territory ‘Intervention’ and Closing the Gap policies in 2008 (8/14 articles). Although these developments were cited in several articles, our methods did not allow us to establish whether there was a relationship between these events and the number of media reports at these times.

Figure 1: Article selection flowchart.



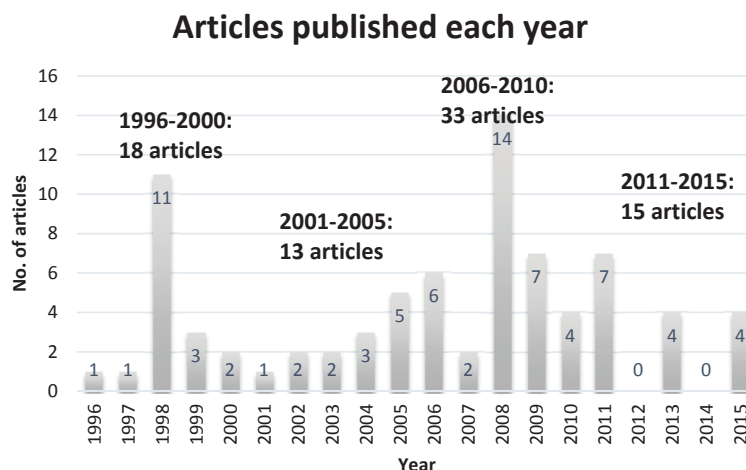
Just under half (46%, $n=36$) of all the articles came from two newspaper sources. *The Australian* had the highest coverage (21 articles) followed by *The West Australian* (19 articles). Half the articles (51%, $n=40$) were from sources owned by News Limited,²⁸ which owns the majority of Australian daily newspapers, including 64% of the sources included in this analysis. The remaining articles were from newspapers owned by Seven West Media (30%, $n=24$) and Fairfax Media (19%, $n=15$). The majority (59%, $n=47$) of stories were about remote Aboriginal communities. Approximately two-thirds (66%, $n=52$) of all articles were about Western Australia, Northern Territory and/or Queensland. Only four articles discussed urban Aboriginal communities, and there were no stories from Victoria or Tasmania.

Content of articles

A range of nutrition issues was covered. One-quarter (25%, $n=20$) of articles were about food supply or food security, particularly limited access to affordable, nutritious foods in remote Aboriginal communities. Similar proportions of the articles focused on maternal and child nutrition (24%, $n=19$) and obesity and chronic diseases ($n=18$, 23%), particularly diabetes and kidney disease. Three articles (4%) specifically focused on micronutrient malnutrition, predominantly iron deficiency anaemia. The remainder of the stories (24%, $n=19$) referred to general dietary quality among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Figure 3 shows the frequency of articles about each nutrition issue in each five-year period, and how this changed over time. In 1996–2000, the majority of articles were

Figure 2: News articles about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition 1996–2015.



about dietary quality ($n=7/14$, 39%), while obesity/chronic disease and maternal/child nutrition received the most coverage in 2001–2005 (five articles each). In 2006–2010, the issue with the greatest coverage was food supply/food security, constituting one-third of all articles ($n=11/33$). In 2011–2015, the coverage was evenly spread across the major issues; however, anaemia and malnutrition among babies and children emerged as prominent issues during this period ($n=4/15$, 27%).

Policy function of articles

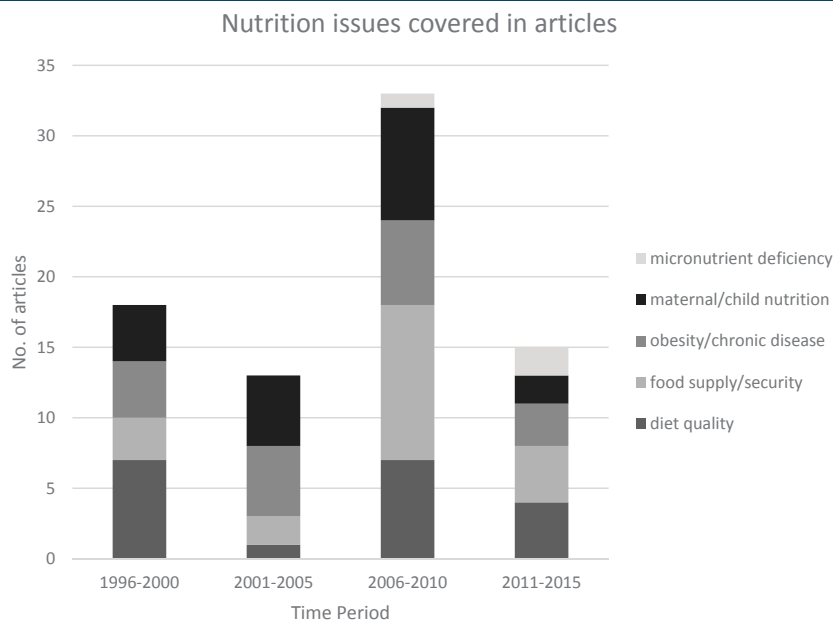
Newspaper articles were categorised as serving one of six policy functions. These are described below, using examples and quotations from articles to illustrate how they related to policy. Figure 4 shows the different

kinds of articles published, based on the six policy function categories, in each five-year period. Highlighting 'problems' was a major function of newspaper articles over all time periods; however, with time, an increasing proportion of articles focussed on promoting successful programs and advocating policy 'solutions'.

Highlighting 'problems'

The most common policy function of the newspaper articles was highlighting specific policy 'problems' related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition. One-quarter of articles ($n=20$, 25%) highlighted the prevalence and impact of various food and nutrition issues, such as those described above. Examples of headlines for this kind of article include: 'Poor diets destroying

Figure 3: Breakdown of nutrition issues covered over time.



Aboriginal health' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 22/1/98) and 'Anaemia crisis in the outback' (*The Australian*, 31/8/13).

Articles highlighting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition problems often advocated action by government to address them. For example, coverage of the 1998 AMA report on nutrition in remote Aboriginal communities included headlines such as 'Call for spending on poor Aboriginal nutrition' (*The Age*, 22/1/98), which outlined how the AMA recommended a national strategy and specific funding "to improve the cost, quality and availability of fresh food".

Promoting a program or service

Promoting a particular program or health service related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition was the second most frequent function of the articles (n=17, 22%). These articles were positive stories about the work undertaken by community-based organisations to improve nutrition. Examples include 'Bush tucker show for Goldfields' (*The West Australian*, 21/10/00) and 'Aboriginal health service to target nutrition in 2016' (*The Canberra Times*, 27/12/15).

Many of these articles were one-off 'good news' stories. However, some individuals or organisations used media coverage to position their program as a blueprint for future policy. For example, in 'Green approach to Indigenous diet' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 25/3/04), the Fred Hollows Foundation promoted a nutrition project as a "template for resolving major Aboriginal health issues".

Reporting government announcements

Reporting of government announcements regarding new policies, programs or initiatives was also common (19%, n=15). Announcement articles were prevalent in all time periods except 2011–2015, when there was only one announcement: 'Health gap check up' (*The Sunday Mail*, 7/4/13). In this article, the Australian Bureau of Statistics announced that it was launching a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health survey, in which it would be "collecting new information concerning diet and exercise as well as levels of iron, blood glucose and cholesterol".

Another example of government using newspaper articles to make announcements about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition occurred in 1998. In response to the AMA report (see above), a spokesman for the Health Minister reported that the "Department of Health and Family Services was already working on a nutrition strategy" (*The Age*, 22/1/98). In the article, 'Black diet focus of health strategy' (*The Australian*, 22/1/98), the Minister announced "a Federal Government strategy to smash the link between poor nutrition and high disease and illness rates".

Advocating 'solutions'

Eighteen articles reported individuals or organisations advocating for a specific policy 'solution' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and nutrition issues. This kind of article mostly appeared in the latter half of the period under examination. The solutions proposed varied considerably, but included 'taxpayer-funded rations' (*The West Australian*, 30/5/06), 'subsidies for fresh food' (*The Age*,

14/1/09) and 'free gym memberships, medical checks and nutritional advice' (12/7/13). However, the most prominent example of advocacy for a particular nutrition policy was led by the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council (NPY Women's Council) in 2011. This coalition of Aboriginal and mainstream organisations lobbied for the introduction of an income management scheme in remote South Australia. Advocates proposed a "voluntary food card ... that can only be used to buy healthy food goods or hardware items" (*The Sunday Mail*, 27/11/11). Four articles from three newspapers covered this story.

Critiquing government

At least one article in each five-year time period criticised government policy (n=6, 8% of articles). For example, in 'Outback Stores is not the solution' (*Canberra Times*, 29/6/10), a researcher from the Centre for Independent Studies condemned the Howard Government's nutrition campaigns that "imply that people make poor food choices because they do not know any better". Regarding the establishment of a company to manage remote stores, the article suggested that "rather than running stores for Indigenous communities, Outback Stores should be empowering residents to run the stores themselves".

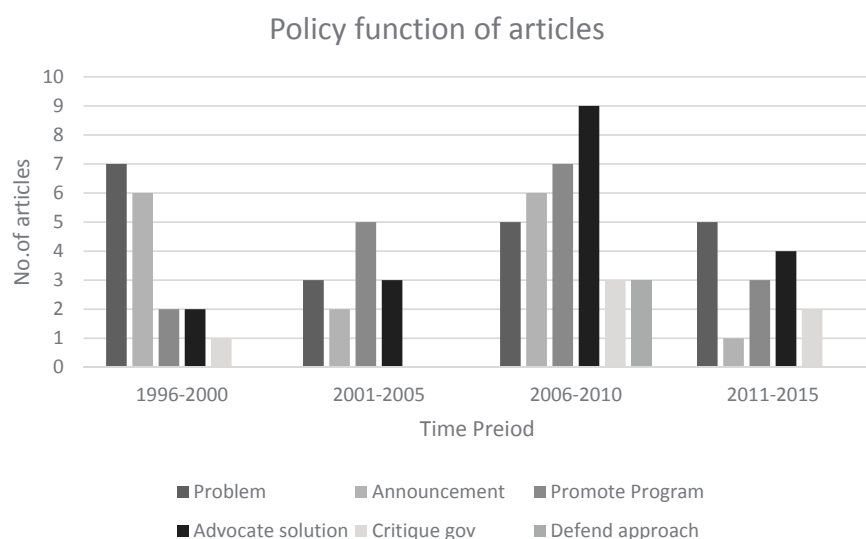
Defending policy

There were three articles that were predominantly about government defending its policy approach. All three were published between 2006 and 2010, and were related to the Northern Territory 'intervention'. In these articles, the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, asserted that "restrictions on welfare payments in Aboriginal communities have led to a dramatic rise in the consumption of fresh food" (*The Australian*, 12/3/08). However, following media coverage of research refuting this claim, Minister Macklin "released a report demolishing the findings" and "vowed to press on with compulsory welfare quarantining" (*The Australian*, 7/6/2010).

Stakeholder voices

A variety of stakeholders were included in the articles. These included politicians, public servants, Aboriginal leaders, academics (often framed as 'expert opinion'), and representatives from Aboriginal organisations, non-government

Figure 4: Policy function of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition articles.



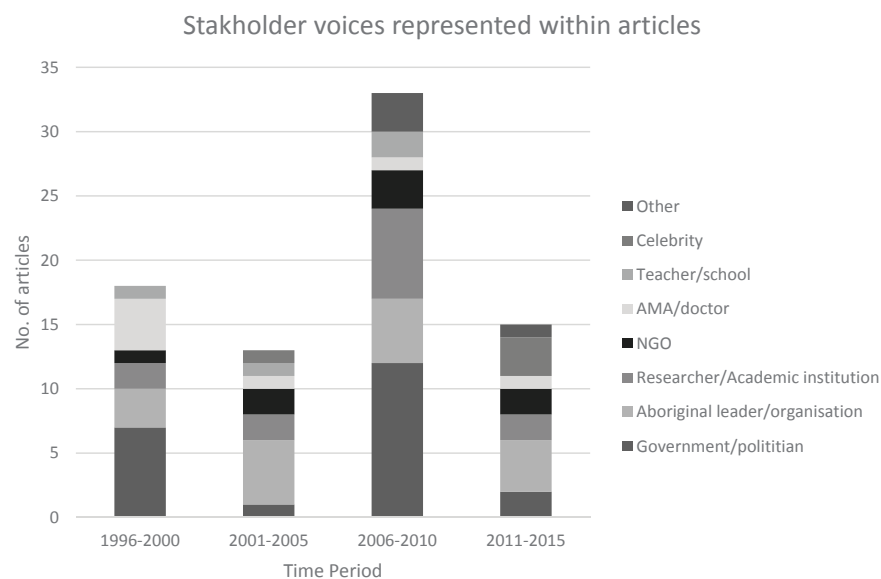
organisations, schools and health services. Government or political actors were most frequently represented ($n=22$, 28%), with Tony Abbott's name appearing most often ($n=7$) followed by Michael Wooldridge ($n=5$), both in their capacity as Health Ministers. The names of Ministers responsible for Indigenous health during 2010–2015 did not appear at all in articles about nutrition. Government voices predominated in the time periods with large numbers of policy announcements (1996–2000 and 2006–2010); however, during the other two periods, researchers, NGOs and Aboriginal leaders or organisations were the stakeholders most frequently represented in articles (Figure 5). Frequently cited organisational actors included the AMA, Menzies School of Health Research and the Fred Hollows Foundation, which were each mentioned in six articles. The Public Health Association of Australia was mentioned in three articles.

Notably, in 2011–2015, Aboriginal stakeholders were the most prominent voices represented in nutrition stories. Six of the 15 articles published during this period featured Aboriginal organisations such as the Mai Wiru stores group, NPY Women's Council (both in South Australia), Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service (Canberra) and the Bulgarr Ngaru Medical Aboriginal Corporation (NSW). The voices of Aboriginal academics and celebrities were also represented during this period.

Framing of articles

News angles employed by the newspaper stories were overwhelmingly negative with the majority representing nutrition as an individual behavioural issue. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health was frequently framed as being in 'crisis' ($n=22$, 28%). A dominant discourse was that the 'poor diet' and 'lifestyle' of Aboriginal people was responsible for health disparities. Several articles (11%, $n=9$) used sensational language, suggesting that Aboriginal people were to blame for their health problems. This was especially common in articles from the first ten years, which included statements such as "Indigenous communities are literally eating themselves sick" (*The Australian*, 21/1/98) and described "bad diet" as a "self-inflicted problem behaviour" (*The Age*, 3/6/2005). Several of the negative articles (16%, $n=13$) were framed as 'expert opinion', in which quotations from non-Aboriginal health 'experts' were prominent. These stories

Figure 5: Key stakeholder represented in nutrition articles 1996-2016.



portrayed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as 'the other' with headlines such 'Aboriginal diet less healthy: report' (*The West Australian*, 15/7/2008)

Structural framing of nutrition issues was also common. Sixteen articles (20%) discussed nutrition within a social justice or equity frame. These articles frequently highlighted the high cost of foods in remote communities, as well as other social determinants of health, for example 'Town where families can't afford to eat' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 25/8/2008). These articles focussed on improving nutrition through policy change and/or creating health food environments in community settings. Two articles framed nutrition issues as being a result of 'government failure'.

Fourteen articles (18%) were framed as 'Aboriginal-led solutions' to nutrition issues. These stories were about the initiatives individuals and organisations were undertaking to improve nutrition in local communities or settings. Some recent headlines reflected self-determination, such as 'Aboriginal health service to target nutrition in 2016' (*Canberra Times*, 27/12/15) and 'Groups seek income control in APY lands' (*The Advertiser*, 10/9/11). Most of these articles used strengths-based language, featured Aboriginal voices and focused on the positive aspects of Aboriginal communities and culture. Five articles highlighted the health benefits of traditional foods, for example 'Bush tucker may beat ills' (*The West Australian*, 17/9/2008).

Discussion

This is the first systematic analysis of newspaper coverage on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health policy issues over a 20-year timeframe. This timeframe includes many significant policy developments such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response²⁹ and the Closing the Gap reforms.³⁰ Furthermore, this period saw many important changes in leadership and representation for First Australians including the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission; the establishment (and dismantling) of various ministerial advisory committees; and further growth of the Aboriginal Community Controlled health sector.³¹

Nutrition is an important component of the holistic approach to improving health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples,³² yet has received limited media coverage. Only 79 articles on this topic were published between 1996 and 2015, representing an average of less than four articles per year across all Australian major newspapers. Coverage of general nutrition and diet issues is much greater, with Bonfiglioli et al. identifying 108 articles about "fast food" and 88 about "sweet drinks" in 2007 alone,³³ and Chau et al. finding that more than 15,000 Australian newspaper articles published between 1986 and 2006 mentioned obesity.³⁴ Our findings are similar to those of Islam and Fitzgerald,⁷ who identified limited media coverage of obesity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

peoples, despite the prevalence of stories about obesity in the mainstream media.

It is an interesting finding that the two peaks in coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition coincide with periods of substantial policy action, although a causative relationship cannot be established. The key nutrition policy announcements covered in the 1996–2000 period were the development of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan³⁵ and the Western Australian Aboriginal Food and Nutrition Policy.³⁶ In the 2007–10 period, newspaper articles about nutrition often related to the income management policies in the Northern Territory and the Closing the Gap health reforms.³⁷

The current study found that newspaper articles overwhelmingly represented Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a negative light. We concur with the observation that “policy debate is primarily a discourse between non-Indigenous Australians engaging Aboriginal people as subject matter”.^{38(p224)} Our findings are consistent with previous research,^{18–20} which has demonstrated that media reporting of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health issues perpetuates a discourse of deficits and contributes to racist stereotypes and ongoing colonisation.³⁹ Racism is increasingly recognised as a determinant of the health inequalities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.^{40–42} Previous research about media coverage of nutrition issues in the general Australian population has also found that news stories often portray obese people in a manner that may result in stigmatisation and victim-blaming.⁴⁶

The framing of nutrition as an individual ‘lifestyle’ issue is similar to the findings of other Australian studies examining media framing of obesity.^{45,43} However, structural determinants of nutrition, particularly in remote communities, were also prominent in many articles. This finding concurs with Islam and Fitzgerald’s⁷ observation that, while both individual and structural frames are deployed by the media, behavioural or biomedical solutions to nutrition issues are overemphasised. The framing of health and nutrition as an individual responsibility, which can be addressed through paternalistic policies such as compulsory income management, is at odds with international human rights agreements, which state that Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination and to “the enjoyment of the

highest attainable standard of physical and mental health”^{44(p9)} and that all citizens have the right to adequate food.⁴⁵

This study adds to the growing body of literature about the relationship between mainstream news media reporting and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy.^{10,11,21} We identified six policy functions of newspaper articles: highlighting problems; reporting government announcements; promoting programs; advocating solutions; critiquing government; and defending policy. An encouraging finding was that, while many articles focus on ‘problems’, there is increasing coverage of ‘solutions’, and successful programs and representation of Aboriginal voices in mainstream newspaper articles appear to be increasing. Aboriginal leaders have called for the mainstream media to cover more “success stories” rather than stories of “disadvantage”.^{46,47} Furthermore, it has been suggested that increasing Indigenous voices in the media may reduce deficit stereotypes and align health reporting with the priorities of First Peoples.^{17,39}

A limitation of this study is that only major newspapers were included. The analysis did not include online, radio, television or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media outlets. While it is likely that these sources could have provided additional relevant articles, it has been suggested that mainstream media sources have the greatest influence on policy.³ Furthermore, as indicated by Table 1, not all newspapers were available on the *Factiva* database from January 1996. Thus, the number of articles about nutrition in the 1996–2000 time period may be slightly higher than reported here.

Our findings suggest that media coverage appears to respond to policy announcements, but also to advocacy from non-government organisations, including Aboriginal-controlled organisations. Findings suggest that medical and public health professionals have the potential to be powerful advocates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition; however, non-Indigenous health ‘experts’ and journalists have a responsibility to ensure that media stories do not contribute to negative representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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