Vegetarianism, the avoidance of eating flesh, has been noted ‘to represent one of the key moral and political issues of the late modern period’ (1). This seems an extraordinary statement when it is considered that the proportion of vegetarians in developed countries is quite small. For example, the 1995 National Nutrition Survey (2) indicated that the percentage of the Australian adult population that would select ‘vegetarian diet’ as the best description of their usual way of eating was 3.7%. The percentage of self-identified vegetarians in the UK and the USA in the mid-1990s was estimated to be less than 8% (1). Despite the small apparent proportion of vegetarians, there is a much more substantial proportion of the population which appears to restrict meat (especially red meat) in its diet. For example, from the food frequency questionnaire in the 1995 National Nutrition Survey, 40% of Australian men and 48% of Australian women aged 19 years or older stated that they consumed red meat three times or less per week (3).

Lea and Worsley have surveyed South Australian adults and identified a substantial population segment they call ‘cognitive vegetarians’ (4). This consumer segment was identified by utilising mailed responses to a general population survey which included questions on beliefs about meat, barriers to vegetarian diets and benefits of vegetarian diets. After subjects had identified themselves as vegetarian, semi-vegetarian or non-vegetarian, the authors found that 15% of the non-vegetarians shared similar beliefs about meat and vegetarian diets as the vegetarians. Lea and Worsley examined the characteristics of the ‘cognitive vegetarians’ and compared them with the vegetarians and the remaining non-vegetarians in their survey.

This interesting approach taken by Lea and Worsley has similarities with social marketing methods (5). They have used consumer research to define a specific consumer segment, and profiled this group according to demographic characteristics, behaviour and attitudes. They have used ‘stages of change’ behavioral theory to assess the likelihood of behaviour change in relation to adopting a vegetarian diet. To follow through with a social marketing approach, their next step might be to tailor specific messages and products that are responsive to the identified wants and needs of the target group and refine them as necessary. The authors appear to conclude that the identified population group will want a vegetarian diet and is therefore likely to need education about vegetarian diets and the vegetarian diet itself. They point out the implications for the development of program implementation elements by nutrition educators and the food industry.

Some intriguing findings are outlined in this report. It should come as no surprise that there is a substantial proportion of people that shares views on meat and vegetarianism with some vegetarians. People may be vegetarian for a wide range of reasons—these include beliefs relating to religion, economics, philosophy and ethics, politics, the environment and health (1). Historically, the vegetarian movement has had strong links to other social movements such as animal rights, anti-vivisection, pacifism and the environmental movement. The choice of what to eat, particularly where food is available in abundance, is value laden and strongly related to personal identity. It is not surprising therefore that people who eat no red meat share beliefs with people who eat some, but relatively little, red meat.

In the examination of characteristics of the ‘cognitive vegetarians’, many characteristics appear to be somewhere between vegetarian and the remaining non-vegetarians. In comparison with the other non-vegetarians, the ‘cognitive vegetarians’ were more likely to be female, born outside Australia and interested in vegetarianism and less likely to eat red meat as frequently and be employed full-time. There was no difference between these groups in age, income, education or consumption of white meat, fish/seashell or eggs.

In some characteristics, the ‘cognitive vegetarians’ did not fall between the vegetarians and the other non-vegetarians. For example, compared to the other two groups, more ‘cognitive vegetarians’ thought they needed to improve the health of their diet, more ‘sometimes or often’ used dietitians/nutritionists, doctors and cooking magazines as an information source and more trusted dietitians/nutritionists as an information source. If the group is generally insecure about how healthy their diet is, one wonders whether they are in the process of changing their diet. If so, are they likely to become more vegetarian or less vegetarian? Or could it be changing in ways not related to vegetarianism? If their diet is relatively static, for how long do they remain a group that is dissatisfied with the healthiness of their diet (and perhaps other aspects of their lifestyle)? These are questions that might be reasonably addressed by cohort studies that assess how the attitudes and food behaviours of groups of people vary with time. Cohort studies are typically used (among other things) to make inferences about how and when diet contributes to the development of disease. There is surely also substantial interest in investigating why and how people change their dietary intake and attitude toward diet over time.

Lea and Worsley found that the group of ‘cognitive vegetarians’ were disproportionately female compared to the other non-vegetarians. This was also the finding for self-identified vegetarians in the National Nutrition Survey (2) and probably arises because more females elect to be vegetarian rather than a gender imbalance in membership of religions that include vegetarianism, or other involuntary circumstances. What set of values associated with being female results in a higher likelihood of being vegetarian, or having a relatively infrequent intake of red meat? The answer to this question might be of particular
interest to people who seek to influence dietary change. The percentage of females who were self-identified vegetarians in the National Nutrition Survey peaked at age 19 to 24 years at 6.2% and fell to half that at age 65 years and over. While this might be a cohort effect (i.e. this group of vegetarians will remain vegetarians throughout life), it may also be a reflection of a change in values, or a change in life circumstance or opportunity.

The authors state that the ‘cognitive vegetarians’ may be susceptible to the promotion of vegetarianism supported by their finding that more of this group were thinking of making (and expected to make) changes towards vegetarianism than the other non-vegetarians. The term ‘susceptibility’ has similar meaning to ‘vulnerability’ or ‘weakness’ and may imply that ‘cognitive vegetarians’ should be taken advantage of by nutrition educators or food producers—but it may be that at this point in time, a relatively large proportion of the adult population is considering making dietary changes towards vegetarianism and would resist being pushed in that direction. There is some suggestion that the previous dominant health sector concern about the risks of inadequacy of a vegetarian diet is being replaced by the dominant expectation of likely benefits (6). However the benefits of a largely plant-based diet need not exclude meat. In any case, over the coming decades an increasingly large proportion of the population of the developed world may be driven toward a vegetarian diet, not by concerns of nutritional health, ethics or philosophy, but by ecological necessity and population pressure (7,8). If this trend was to eventuate, it would be worth knowing much more about how personal values influence dietary intake and about the semi-vegetarians and the ‘cognitive vegetarians’.

Malcolm Riley
Associate Professor, Nutrition and Dietetics
Department of Medicine
Monash University
Monash Medical Centre

References