



Dietitians Association of Australia 35<sup>th</sup> National Conference

## LECTURE IN HONOUR OF PETER WILLIAMS

# Nutrition – A science, not a religion

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In May 1998 at the 17<sup>th</sup> National Conference in Sydney, Professor Peter Williams, the then director of Scientific and Consumer Affairs at Kellogg Australia, delivered the last Margaret Shoobridge lecture before it became known as the Lecture in Honour. Entitled “Deviance and Diversity” much of what he said still rings true today, some of it even more loudly. Peter had a full paper on this subject published in the *Journal of Critical Dietetics* in 2012 which is well worth a revisit.

20 years later in the same venue (albeit not in the same building) I now have the privilege of honouring Peter and his enormous contributions to both DAA and the profession of dietetics.

Lectures in honour were, until relatively recently, entirely dedicated to the dearly departed pioneers and leaders of the profession however, Peter is very much alive so it is both exciting and daunting to have the recipient of one’s presentation sitting in the audience.

Peter is accompanied by Geoff, his partner of 22 years and husband of 11 years – married in Canada and now finally recognised in Australia. Congratulations! Considering he came out to his

colleagues as a gay man in that lecture 20 years ago, it has been a long road. I am sorry to disappoint you but no big reveals about me today.

When I met with Peter to begin my research for this lecture he was adamant that he did not want this to be an expose of his career, that simply being recognised was enough which is typical of his humble approach. However, I cannot pass up the opportunity to pay tribute to his illustrious career even if briefly. Quite honestly, if I tried to cover it all in any detail you would need sleeping bags.

Peter came to dietetics slightly later than most having completed a science degree at ANU and worked in research for the CSIRO in the area of cattle tick immunology – no prizes for guessing why dietetics may have appeared to be a more attractive option.

I first met Peter in 1979 when I was a student in the Sydney University Diploma of Nutrition and Dietetics and Peter was a new graduate dietitian but already obviously held in high regard and on his way up at RPAH. There he took over management of the Food Services and later became Chief Dietitian, following in the footsteps of the legendary Jo Rogers. During that time, he taught into the dietetics program at Sydney University and slogged for 9 years to finish his PhD on Hospital Food in his “spare” time and took his LSL to write it up. Having been in senior management positions myself I know just how little spare time is available. This demonstrated a dedication to research few could match.

Lured to Kellogg, Peter turned his attention to improving product profiles and finding new ways to lower salt content in almost all their cereal products. He continued to research and publish despite the huge workloads and a burden of suspicion and distrust within some sections of the profession, which sadly still exists towards those choosing to work in food industry.

His next move was to the University of Wollongong where his interest in the scientific principles drove his research through the Smart Foods Centre and where he was able to teach, mentor and inspire students of the dietetics programs and novice researchers. Peter only recently attended the graduation of the last PhD student he was supervising there – the end of an era.

Peter's "retirement" to Canberra to support his elderly parents was short lived and he once again entered the university sector to lead the dietetic program at the University of Canberra whilst a permanent discipline lead was organised. This was a critical time for that course and if Peter had not shouldered that burden its future was uncertain. He is still associated with both Wollongong and Canberra Universities.

Peter's reputation as a scientist and researcher saw him appointed to many high-level committees, projects and publications both state and national such as:

- National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) committees that wrote three editions of the Dietary Guidelines for Australia
- NH&MRC Working Group on Review of Recommended Dietary Intake
- Therapeutic Goods Authority (TGA) Advisory Committee on Complementary Medicines
- Board of Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ)
- Advertising Standards Board

- Commonwealth Working Group on a National Food Policy
- DAA Dietetic Credentialing Council
- Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) Technical Expert Group on Nutrition and Health Claims
- President of the Federation of Australian Nutrition Organisations (FANO)
- Member of the National Office on Overseas Skills Recognition Panel in Dietetics
- Chair of the NSW Branch of DAA
- An invited chapter author in three textbooks: *Essentials of Human Nutrition, Food, Nutrition and Health*, and *Meals in science and practice: Interdisciplinary research and business applications*.
- Co-leader of the NH&MRC systematic literature reviews of the evidence to inform the latest revision of the Australian dietary guidelines.
- Member of the FSANZ High Level Health Claims Committee

The list goes on.... And on..... all of which you can read about in detail on the DAA website in his citations for his Fellow credential and Honorary Life Membership. Suffice to say Peter had a significant impact on food and nutrition policy and standards in the broadest sense.

Peter's and my professional lives would diverge and reconnect over the years with both of us being committed volunteers for DAA. We started out in Sydney, both spent significant periods of our careers in the Illawarra and Canberra and now we are back to where it all began just a stone's throw from here.

We also share a strong interest in food service which seems to be increasingly undervalued as an area of practice but which is so fundamental to the food supply and such a great area of opportunity for dietitians. A territory we need to reclaim.

Peter can be described as a true ‘foodie’ whose love of interesting and good quality food combined with a love of travel saw his life peppered with great food experiences. The art of food and the science of nutrition have been intricately interwoven. In that we also have much in common.

I particularly had the privilege of serving with Peter on the DAA Board when he was President and have vivid memories of his strong commitment to professional advancement, to supporting and championing research and evidence-based practice, his openness to a range of views and also his compassion. I was experiencing a particularly difficult personal situation and after a slightly teary Board dinner I received a most supportive personal letter from Peter which was of great comfort.

He was also on the panel which appointed me as CEO of DAA so it is somehow fitting we are together again at this time as I step down from that role.

In his Margaret Shoobridge lecture of 1998, Peter noted that to be professionals we must accept the challenge to constantly question and change saying that “rituals may have a place in religion; they should have no place in science”. Which brings me to the theme of this lecture “Nutrition, a science not a religion”.

Anyone who knows me well, and especially my staff, would have heard me say that more than once, and usually followed by the observation that I manage a professional association, not a church. My staff would also be familiar with my frequent corrections of documents replacing the words “DAA believes” with “based on the evidence, DAA contends...”

For much of my career, and for the vast majority of Australians, nutrition was viewed with at best mild interest through to downright derision.

Most of you are too young to remember dietitians being referred to on the floor of Federal parliament as the “Food Police” and in a key note address as “Wise Virgins” because we were banging on about the looming crisis of obesity and chronic disease and the need to change eating habits and food supply long before it became “fashionable”. We all **so** wished that nutrition would move higher on the agenda and be of greater interest to everyone. It was a case of be careful what you wish for.

Now that the world, or at least those with enough money not to have to worry about where their next meal may be coming from, seem to be consumed by what can only be described as fervent food and nutrition belief systems much of which is underpinned by little other than the vain hope of finding the magic bullet, distrust of the experts or just plain greed.

These belief systems have produced what have been described as “tribes” which could almost be compared to the various religious denominations with equivalent doses of intolerance.

Increasingly both as individuals and as a profession we are being pressured to declare which side we are on, what do we believe? Faced with such fervour, responding with prosaic scientific evidence is like whistling into the wind and it is small wonder that dietitians feel overwhelmed, sidelined and devalued. That profile and prominence we aspired to was at least partially knocked out of our reach by the ‘Johnny come latelies’ who saw the light.

Adherence to an evidence-based approach can also be a two-edged sword. Faith is based on dogma, science is not. As evidence is gathered our understanding grows and our positions must necessarily shift. To a public and the policy makers who just want ‘the answer’ it can make us appear indecisive and weak. We are in a somewhat unique situation. Other advances in health and medicine are rarely greeted with the

opprobrium which greets advances in dietary advice. When real cause of gastric ulcers was discovered and a simple treatment made available no whinged about doctors changing their minds. It is in nutrition where science runs head on into dearly held rituals and beliefs. The challenge is to manage that conflict and to clearly communicate why advice is changing and to celebrate those advances. We need to stop apologising for making new advances. In reality though our basic public message has remained fairly consistent for as long as I can remember, it is just hard to convince people of that.

Unfortunately, that explosion in interest in nutrition at the public level has not necessarily translated into similar recognition and action in other areas of dietetic interest such as hospital food service where it is still relegated to a hotel service ripe for cost cutting.

Dietitians have always advocated strongly for healthier choices in all settings, taking different approaches as required. That message of balance and moderation was once derided because we were killjoys now it is derided because we are not sufficiently evangelical i.e. Don't let the evidence get in the way of activism or the latest diet product. Being evidence based, pragmatic and collaborative is now seen as being on the dark side. Unless one is seen on the frontline of something wearing sack cloth and ashes one is viewed with suspicion. It is understandably tempting to hitch the wagon to one of these tribes, beliefs or causes in the hope of gaining some traction.

However, Peter also noted in 1998: correct diet (at least according to the ancient Greeks who came up with the concept) was not the unquestioning obedience to the authority of another. As dietitians our true role is to empower people to choose wisely for themselves. Yet we have members of the profession marketing themselves as this or that type of diet proponent or ... as using only one

particular approach which by definition suggests an obedience to a specific authority or regime – the gospel according to.....

Are we becoming trapped in belief systems rather than science? Are we setting ourselves up to capture markets and reaffirm the belief systems and rituals of others? Can we give impartial advice to clients when we have already run our colours up the mast? Are we prepared to sell our credibility for 30 pieces of silver?

A classic, but very recent, example of this is the determination of pharmacists to continue to sell completely discredited and totally non-evidence based homeopathic remedies on the basis that is better if they sell them than someone else because people want them. They contend they can give the soundest advice on the efficacy of the product. Since that advice would be there is none so don't buy it, the argument is moot.

Unfortunately, it is becoming more prevalent especially in quite public social media platforms for dietitians to savage each other about particular approaches, about where they choose to work or through alignment with nutrition “movements”.

The casualty of this fevered discourse is often the science. No one should be under any illusion that science is under attack. Federal Parliament was recently described to me by a sitting member, who has a health background, as an “evidence free zone” with policy being driven, much more than usual, by ideology, ignorance or self-interest. This is by no means confined to nutrition but we are also a casualty. This does not mean we should abandon the science but we do have to work doubly hard to get any wins.

I have often heard my academic colleagues lament that most people struggle with evidence because they do not understand the principles of critical appraisal and this includes policy makers and journalists who can seriously skew public understanding of nutrition. Unfortunately,

dietitians themselves are not immune from that criticism. We cannot criticise others if we fall into the same trap of grabbing the latest bit of research and veering off on tangents. Critical appraisal is a key component of our professional tool box which should be acquired early, kept sharp and strongly recommended to others.

Challenging current practices, debating the evidence and working in diverse settings which push the boundaries of practice are all healthy behaviours but as a profession we have a responsibility to stand by the scientific underpinning of our profession and to make our point of difference the solid evidence base from which we aspire to practice.

That does not imply that we need to be hidebound or rigid because old unchallenged rituals can be just as destructive as new ones but we are on a slippery slope if our approach is “what sells” as opposed to what is the evidence.

While we are overwhelmed by the cacophony of the quasi-religious debate about what is right or wrong/ black or white in food and nutrition; the breadth, depth and subtlety of our practice remains largely invisible and the people who need our help most are being short changed.

Once the tumult and the shouting dies and we cart away the dead carcasses of the myriad of failed rituals and regimes the cold hard question is:

What has all this public focus on food and nutrition actually achieved particularly for us as a profession?

The heightened interest in nutrition has seen a surge of interest in entering the field either as dietitians or from some other angle exacerbated by the current higher education policy of no limits in intake. This has added to the crowded space and general hubbub with some uncomfortable bedfellows. There is no shortage of need but there certainly is a shortage of

tangible opportunity to gainfully employ this growing tide.

In the broad policy-based settings, nutrition and dietetics is viewed as mostly a population health “thing” and related to obesity and chronic disease. Tube feeding a disabled child who is unable to swallow is apparently a ‘preventative’ activity according to the NDIS and confined to ‘health concerns’. Getting traction in the treatment and food service space outside of mainstream health especially in relation to disability, aged care and mental health is particularly difficult. Reconnecting the brain with the rest of the body in the mental health space is a particular challenge but also a huge opportunity. We have solid and growing evidence of the value of our contribution in these areas as well as the myriad other specialised areas in which we work. Getting this on the agenda is paramount.

We are pigeonholed by our public persona as lifestyle professionals and even this space is being squeezed by others especially in primary care where there was great hope for increased opportunity but this is not materialising with the work we are best equipped to do being assumed by others.

I would suggest that whilst we have continued to advance in knowledge and skills since the nutrition revolution we have not yet really been great beneficiaries and neither has the science. We still have a lot of work to do to be seen broadly as serious players in a wide range of health issues.

I do not mean to imply that we have achieved nothing and there have been no gains for the profession but I have the strong sense that the gains we have achieved, through advocacy based on the evidence, would have been made anyway such as the inclusion of malnutrition prevention in the Hospital and health care standards, or gaining Medicare provider numbers.

We should not underestimate the challenges but that should inspire us to work doubly hard. Peter faced many hard challenges throughout his career but he did not give up or complain about it. He rolled up his sleeves and waded into the fight time and time again and he has made a difference for all of us.

Much of Peter's achievements have been in the background and at higher policy levels, all his work based on sound evidence. Make no mistake this is where real progress is made for all of us and it does not have to involve loud demonstrations of faith.

Nutrition may have become the new religion for some but for us as dietitians it must always remain a science which we use to help others to fit healthful eating into the context of their lives.

We still have a lot of heavy lifting to do but the example set by outstanding leaders like Peter and so many who beaver away quietly in the background adding to the evidence base, should be our inspiration to keep science, through research and evidence translation, at the heart of what we do.

We stand on the foundations built by those who went before us. It is our responsibility to continue to build that structure. How strong will the fabric be that we leave behind or will the white ants win?

I will not say "here endeth the lesson, amen" but rather Dr Peter Williams, I salute you and commend your legacy to your peers that they might follow your lead with excellence, integrity and generosity as their touchstones.