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### Reviewing the meanings of wellbeing and wellness and their implications for food choice

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## Reviewing the meanings of wellbeing and wellness and their implications for food choice

### Abstract

Wellness and wellbeing are terms found in a broad range of literature such as economics, social science, food marketing and general social commentary. These terms are often used in contexts which encompass mental, physical and emotional health as well as broader more esoteric aspects of life satisfaction such as happiness. The terms wellness and wellbeing are also used ubiquitously and variably in health practice. However, there is limited understanding about the terms' use in the broader health promotion context and how consumers might interpret these terms in the context of food and nutrition messages. The primary aim of this paper is to review how the terms of wellbeing and wellness are being utilized within a number of disciplines and describe implications for food choice. It is proposed if it can be identified how these terms are used by key players within the food system it will enable more effective communication across sectors. This may assist in the collaborative development of public health food nutrition messages that are consistent with the intended meaning.

### Disciplines

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**Abstract**

Wellness and wellbeing are terms found in a broad range of literature such as economics, social science, food marketing and general social commentary. These terms are often used in contexts which encompass mental, physical and emotional health as well as broader more esoteric aspects of life satisfaction such as happiness. The terms wellness and wellbeing are also used ubiquitously and variably in health practice. However, there is limited understanding about the terms' use in the broader health promotion context and how consumers might interpret these terms in the context of food and nutrition messages. The primary aim of this paper is to review how the terms of wellbeing and wellness are being utilized within a number of disciplines and describe implications for food choice. It is proposed if it can be identified how these terms are used by key players within the food system it will enable more effective communication across sectors. This may assist in the collaborative development of public health food nutrition messages that are consistent with the intended meaning.

**Key words:**            wellness, wellbeing, food choice, nutrition messages, consumers;

## INTRODUCTION

Wellbeing and wellness are terms ubiquitously used in every day communications and within health literature and practice<sup>1-3</sup>. Within the clinical sciences literature these terms are often used in quite different contexts. They may be used in unqualified relationships with overall health<sup>4,5</sup>, or unspecified correlations to biochemical or other disease markers<sup>6,7</sup>, or they may be linked as an important end point within clinical trials utilising quality of life and wellbeing surveys outcomes with specific biochemical markers of disease<sup>8-10</sup>. Randall notes that paradigm shifts from disease management to wellness has been painstaking over centuries within the medical fraternity and not without angst with the public health discipline<sup>11</sup>. However there have been a number of physicians over the last 50 years who have been interested in revisiting the multidimensional nature of health and have contributed to developing wellness models that can be used within health promotion. Dunn<sup>12</sup> has been cited by Hattie et al<sup>13</sup> as the “architect” of the current wellness movement in the 1960’s, following on Hettler’s<sup>14</sup> proposed a hexagon model of wellness in the 1980’s. Hettler’s model focuses on creating balance between six dimensions: Physical (where nutrition and food choice specifically falls), Spiritual, Intellectual, Social, Emotional and Occupational<sup>15</sup>.

Apart from use within various models for health promotion, the terms wellness and wellbeing are also found within public health literature relating to indicators of health<sup>16</sup>. Measurement of population health has lead to specific concerns about the lamentable rise of preventable disease such as obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes<sup>17</sup>. Within public health policy documents a number of strategies have been researched and

promoted around energy balance and food intake patterns to help arrest these diseases proliferation<sup>18</sup>. In particular encouraging healthy food choices has been identified for the improvement of health outcomes for specific populations<sup>19-21</sup> as evidence has accumulated on the benefits of risk reduction with diet and lifestyle changes<sup>22, 23</sup> and appropriate food choice<sup>24, 25</sup>. The links between health, food intake and wellness and wellbeing are not only occurring within health policy documents but also found in materials that may be used for communication directly with the public by health authorities, non-government organizations, the food industry and health professionals<sup>19, 26-28</sup>.

Previous reviews on the construct of wellbeing have described the lack of consensus about how it can be ‘identified, measured and achieved’ to be successfully used within health research and promotion<sup>29</sup>. Indeed the diversity of meaning for wellbeing has been linked to a number of specific discourses, including scientific and environmental which is likely to influence its use within health promotion per se<sup>30</sup>. This paper reviews how the terms of wellbeing and wellness are being utilized within a number of disciplines and describes implications for food choice. It is hypothesized that understanding how food might be perceived to impact on wellness and wellbeing by individuals and specific populations could help develop more effective nutrition interventions to support healthier food choices. Understanding how the terms wellness and wellbeing are being utilized by key players within the food system, and what is the underpinning rationale for their use, should also enable the development of more coherent and consistent nutrition messages and health promotion activities around food choice.

## FORMAL DEFINITIONS OF WELLNESS AND WELLBEING

In the first instance the terms wellness or wellbeing acknowledge that somehow they describe good health beyond ways as indicated by specific biomarkers, and incorporate psychological components. These terms have subjective components to them and perhaps elusive other dimensions. The Oxford dictionary defines wellbeing as “the state of being or doing well in life; happy, healthy, or prosperous condition; moral or physical welfare (of a person or community)” and wellness as “the state of being well or in good health.”<sup>31</sup>. Clearly in this definition the use of wellbeing implies something more encompassing than just good health. The World Health Organization (WHO) has not specifically identified the meaning of wellbeing or wellness but does use the term wellbeing within its definition of health: “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”<sup>32</sup>.

Wellbeing and wellness are essentially contested concepts since they are everyday terms and usually carry an assumed level of agreement<sup>33</sup>. The meaning of wellbeing and wellness seems to typify this; they can be quite subjective depending on the context in which they are utilized<sup>34,35</sup>. In that sense it relates well to Humpty Dumpty’s remarks in *Alice in Wonderland* that the use of a word ‘means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less’<sup>36</sup>. This suggests that ownership of the term lies with the user. Unlike medically defined terms, the authority to attach meaning to the terms wellness or

wellbeing may need to be shared with the consumer. The following sections describe how the terms may be found within a number of disciplines.

#### Health related disciplines

Within the complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) disciplines the terms appear to be used primarily as a platform for encouraging healthy living practices<sup>37-39</sup> which could include appropriate food intake. Indeed the person who seeks CAM is often seen as being more actively involved in personal health care<sup>40</sup> and addresses aspects of self assessment of 'wellbeing'<sup>39</sup>. Holistic health encompassing all aspects of life is likely to be embodied in the meaning of the term of wellbeing in CAM<sup>39</sup>. Thus food choice could be seen as a proactive way to directly impact on personal health outcomes. However these terms are not just found within the domain of CAM but also found within the literature for more traditional forms of medical care. A number of allied health professionals have reported on how wellness and wellbeing approaches are being interpreted within the various disciplines<sup>41-43</sup>. The various authors acknowledge some short falls related to the persistence of the medical model approach of managing illness rather than the holistic approach of managing wellbeing and wellness. This potential dichotomy of approaches combines with the fact that the two terms are also often used interchangeably by a number of key stakeholders, such as non-government health organizations and food industry players<sup>26, 44-46</sup>. However it also provides an opportunity to find commonality of dimensions of those terms that are relevant to food choice supporting holistic health outcomes.

The use of the terms is not just confined to health related disciplines; they have also been utilized to describe and provide some measurement of human capacity by a variety of different disciplines such as sociology, psychology and economics<sup>29, 39, 47, 48</sup>. These various disciplines are likely to have very different ways of approaching the meaning of those terms purely based on their forms of epistemology and discourse practices.

Confusion may arise in the public arena with the broad range and interchangeability of use not only of the terms in the health context but also by their use by other disciplines.

### Psychology

In the field of psychology, conceptual thinking in relation to the term wellbeing appears to be somewhat privileged. Wellbeing has been defined within the concept of subjective wellbeing incorporating both cognitive and affective evaluations of a person's life, and includes happiness and satisfaction with life<sup>49</sup>. The subjective wellbeing concept is being used as part of a large ongoing research program, The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (AUIW)<sup>50</sup>. This is a comprehensive tracking survey of at least 2000 people which has been conducted regularly since 2001. The AUIW measures satisfaction with an individual's life, and life in the Australian context, and each survey deals with a specific topic area such as health and body weight<sup>51</sup>. The theory of a 'set point' of people's subjective wellbeing is described in the AUWI methodology<sup>52</sup>. The set point theory postulates that people from many cultures have been found to fall within the tested range of subjective wellbeing scoring 70-80 out of the theoretical 0-100 range and most healthy people will maintain this level despite having very different issues and complexities of life to deal with. Areas that are considered important to personal wellbeing are covered in

the survey and include “seven aspects of personal life – health, personal relationships, safety, standard of living achievements, community connectedness and future security”<sup>50</sup>.

Identifying the role food plays within any of these seven aspects may be useful in developing effective interventions targeting healthy food choice to optimize wellness and wellbeing. Although there is conflicting evidence that positive health messages are actually more motivational for consumers than warnings about health risk<sup>50, 53-56</sup>, constructing nutrition health messages that are consistent with individual’ and groups’ paradigms of wellness and wellbeing might improve their effectiveness. This might be one way to motivate people to manage life’s stressors in a positive way by constructive food intake patterns which are achievable and consistent with their subjective constructs of wellbeing and/or wellness. Thus from psychology it would seem the exploration of nutritional health interventions and communications that are consistent with people’s concepts of wellness and wellbeing is where future research might concentrate.

## Economics

As a way of capturing the current and future potential of a population, economists have developed ways of quantifying the wellbeing of populations through concepts such as National Income and Produce Accounts developed in the 1930’s by King and Epstein<sup>57</sup>. Juster et al<sup>48</sup> revisited this and developed a theoretical framework to measure the concept of wellbeing linking economics and sociological approaches. This theoretical framework acknowledges that the resource constraints for individuals and society relate to ‘availability of human time’ and ‘stock of wealth inherited from the past’<sup>48</sup>. This broadly

incorporates tangible assets like housing and intangible skills like psychological consequences. Food features as a product within this framework and has outputs that include gastronomical enjoyment and health. Other economists have also identified the inadequacy of gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of economic wellbeing of countries. GDP does not take into account aspects impacting social outcomes such as long term benefits of accumulation, leisure time, lifespan and disparities of income across a population<sup>58</sup>. Overlaps with economic wellbeing modeling and social research is currently evident when specific social indicators or inequalities effecting health<sup>59</sup> are identified and measured within and across populations. Food security issues are just one of the aspects that need to be considered within these models to ensure equity for groups and individuals are culturally appropriate and enable access and opportunity for appropriate food choice for wellbeing to be achieved.

## Sociology

Social research pertaining to health and the terms of wellbeing and wellness examines the political, social and economic realities for groups and populations and the diversity of influences that account for health and rates of death<sup>3</sup>. Context is critical and changes over time are noted to confuse any measurement of human wellness which go beyond the traditional indicators of life expectancy and include self-related health and esteem<sup>60</sup>. It has also been acknowledged that social science research now needs to look beyond illness and gather data pertaining to 'healthy' bodies and behaviours to contribute to 'positive health and wellbeing'<sup>61</sup>. Sointu<sup>62</sup> describes how proactive, self-responsible individuals are endorsed in social discourse as people having aspirational virtues and

identified as those who can create personal health and well-being. Thus the current use of the terms wellbeing can, by its very nature, be elitist and by default can marginalize those who do not have sufficient skills and support. That is, those who are able to experience power and control are more likely to have positive mental health and contribute to their own health and wellness<sup>63</sup>. Hence nutrition and food communications that incorporate these terms must be carefully examined to ensure further inequalities are not inadvertently being propagated.

### Food marketing

Food suppliers and manufacturers may use the terms as a way to market food or realign food portfolios to meet consumer expectations and/or market opportunities<sup>26, 64, 65</sup>. Indeed some food industry giants<sup>66, 67</sup> have focused their attention on the wellness and wellbeing market, recognizing sales opportunities for the health-conscious market place. Some perhaps have recognized these terms also are an opportunity to articulate a commitment about marketing and development practices to manage potential criticism about the food industry's perceived role in the obesity epidemic sweeping the world<sup>68</sup>. Certainly the functional food market, which has embraced ideas about specific benefits from food and beverage consumption, has recognized these terms are valuable with the consumer market place<sup>69, 70</sup>. The food industry has significant influence on how message are disseminated about food choice<sup>71</sup> so it is critical for public health practitioners and nutrition experts to be aware of their use within this environment. Often use of these terms within public health practice relate solely to food choice behavior to improve health outcomes<sup>27</sup>. Understanding how these terms are used in other contexts may enable

the development of more effective health promotion activities by providing a unifying concept for all involved with health promotion and research activities<sup>29</sup>

## IMPLICATION FOR PUBLIC HEALTH NUTRITIONISTS

Confusion within the public's mind relating to conflicting nutrition messages being delivered from various groups has been previously reported<sup>72, 73</sup>. The broad range of usage of the terms wellness and wellbeing in food related messages may add to this confusion unless their meaning is clarified within the food context. Without these terms being well defined, messages about eating behaviours incorporating these terms may be limited in their effectiveness. There is also potential that inconsistencies with the meaning intended by various stakeholders within the food system could add to consumer confusion and skepticism about health promotion messages. However, if it were possible to identify commonalities in the use of the terms and build messages that recognized those different dimensions, then it might be possible to build a bridge to work collaboratively across different disciplines and sectors more effectively.

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