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Elizabeth Grigonis-Deane
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**THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL
HEALTH OFFICER: MAINTAINING PUBLIC HEALTH
IN THE CONTEXT OF A CHANGING FOOD
REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT**

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the
requirement for the award of the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE - RESEARCH

From

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

By

ELIZABETH GRIGONIS-DEANE, B.A.Sc., B.Sc.

School of Health Sciences 2008

Thesis Certification

CERTIFICATION

I, Elizabeth M. Grigonis-Deane, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Science, in the School of Health Sciences, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Elizabeth M. Grigonis-Deane

7th October 2008

Conference Presentations and Proceedings

Grigonis-Deane, E., Yeatman, H., & Condon-Paoloni, D. (2006). Enhance your brain power! Monitoring health claims on food labels. Poster presented at the *1st International Congress for Public Health and Nutrition*, Barcelona, Spain.

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Thank you all.

List of Acronyms

ANZFA	Australia New Zealand Food Authority
AQIS	Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service
COPONC	Code of Practice on Nutrient Claims
DEETWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
EHO	Environmental Health Officer
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FSANZ	Food Standards Australia New Zealand
FSC	Food Standards Code
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ISC	Implementation Sub-Committee

Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to describe how environmental health officers prioritized different components of food regulation enforcement within the context of their overall workload, to gather information about how to better prepare environmental health officers for the demands of their role. A significant change in the role of environmental health officers is occurring due to new legislative requirements related to food labelling.

In 2003, the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council (the Ministerial Council) developed a Policy Guideline on Nutrition, Health and Related Claims (the Policy Guideline), providing a framework for the regulation of nutrition, health and related claims.

Environmental health officers are likely to be responsible for the enforcement of these proposed new regulations. The proposed monitoring role is as yet untested and the factors influencing the environmental health officers' decisions about prioritization of work load are unknown. The priority given to the enforcement of such regulations may impact on how effectively environmental health officers perform this aspect of their work load.

The data used in this study were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 37 environmental health officers from three states, NSW, QLD and ACT. The sample included male and female officers at both field and senior level across local and state sites. The interview transcripts were analyzed by thematic coding with the aid of a qualitative software analysis package. The work and control scales survey data were analyzed using SPSS 15.

Results showed that field officers considered themselves to be protectors of the community's health, closely interacting with the community and responding to their demands and complaints. Field officers' routine inspections and investigation of food poisoning and hygiene complaints were given highest priority, while monitoring health claims on food labels was given low priority. Conversely, senior officers reported being more involved with management, interacting with outside organizations and politics, and assigned higher priority to the monitoring of health claims on food labels.

The analysis of environmental health officers' work practices and attitudes using the framework of Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level-bureaucracy was used to enhance present understanding of the implications for policy implementation at the interface between the public and government.

This study extends existing knowledge about the motivations behind the work practice of environmental health officers, a poorly researched group, and explores their roles within Lipsky's framework of street-level bureaucrats. The study thus extends Lipsky's model into a new area of work practice. Contrary to previous studies indicating street-level bureaucrats use coping mechanisms to decrease frustration caused by work conditions, this study's results revealed that the desire to create positive outcomes for the community drove the behaviour of environmental health officers.

Further results from this study indicate that environmental health officers, through their work practices and especially in their enforcement role, have the capacity to optimize or lessen the benefits to consumers of food regulations such as nutrition and health related claims on food labels.

Three major recommendations arise out of this study to ensure that consumers benefit from the new legislation regarding nutrition and health related claims on food labels.

There should be provision of sufficient resources and timely training in new responsibilities for environmental health officers. Communication between State and local government authorities must continue to be improved and maintained, so that adequate support and appropriate guidance from team leaders is consistently available.

Lastly, increased public education regarding the importance of nutrition, health and related claims as a tool to make healthier food purchases is needed.

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