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TITLE: Healthy food and beverages in senior community football club canteens in New South Wales, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Issue addressed: Little is known of the extent to which senior sports clubs support the consumption of healthy food and beverages. This study aimed to describe i) the food and beverages available in senior community football club canteens; ii) the perceived acceptability and iii) barriers of club representatives (eg club president or secretary) to providing healthy food and beverage options in club canteens; iv) the associations between the availability of healthy options in sports canteens and the perceived barriers and club characteristics (v) the food and beverages usually purchased from canteen club members.

Methods: The study involved 70 senior community football clubs (Australian Rules Football, Soccer, Rugby League and Rugby Union) across New South Wales, Australia. Club representatives and club members took part in cross-sectional telephone surveys.

Results: The most frequently available items at club canteens were regular soft drinks and potato chips or other salty snacks (available at 99% of clubs). Approximately two thirds (66%) of club representatives agreed or strongly agreed that clubs should provide a greater variety of healthy food options. Perishability and lack of demand were the most frequently cited barriers to healthy food provision. Healthy food options more prevalent among AFL compared with other sporting codes. Overall 6% of club members reported purchasing a healthy food option.

Conclusions: Senior community football clubs primarily stock and sell unhealthy food and beverage items. There is support within clubs for providing more healthy options; however clubs face a number of barriers to the inclusion of healthy foods in club canteens.

So what?: Such findings highlight the need for healthy food and beverage strategies in community sports clubs, and provide insight into the types of strategies required.

INTRODUCTION

Community sports clubs are recognised as one environment that can be utilised to promote healthy behaviour.¹ While sports clubs are environments supportive of physical activity, limited research, predominately with junior community sports clubs in Australia, suggests that their canteens primarily sell food and beverages associated with excessive weight gain.²⁻⁵ The sale of healthy foods and beverages at junior and senior sporting clubs is important to normalise health behaviours through consistent health promotion messages across community settings. The authors, however, were unable to locate any peer reviewed research describing the contents of Australian senior community sports canteens. This study of senior community football clubs aimed to describe:

- the food and beverages available in club canteens;
- the perceived acceptability of club representatives (e.g. club president or secretary) towards selling healthy food and beverages in club canteens;
- the perceived barriers of club representatives towards providing healthy food and beverage options in their club canteen;
- the associations between the availability of healthy options in canteens, Perceived barriers to healthy food and drink availability, and club characteristics; and
- the food and beverages usually purchased from canteens by club members.

METHOD

Design and setting

A cross-sectional survey of members of senior community football clubs from the Hunter, New England and Sydney Metropolitan regions of New South Wales, Australia, was undertaken as part of a larger Randomised Controlled Trial of an alcohol accreditation intervention⁶ (University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee reference: H-2008-0432).

Sample and recruitment

Club representatives

Contact details for community, non-elite football clubs from the four main football codes in Australia (Rugby League, Rugby Union, Soccer and Australian Rules (AFL)) were collected from sports associations, local government websites and web searches. A single representative (e.g. club president) from each eligible club was sent a letter inviting their participation. Club representatives were eligible if they were a member of the club's executive (e.g. club president or secretary) and were from clubs which had food and beverages available for sale (including alcohol), had players 18 years of age and over; had over 40 registered members.

Club members

Representatives of consenting clubs were asked to invite 25 adult registered club members (e.g. players, supporters, club officials or executives) with the most recent birthday to participate in the study, and to provide the research team with the contact details of consenting members. Club members were eligible if they were 18 years of age or over.

Data collection and measures

Computer assisted telephone interview (CATI) surveys were conducted with one club representative and the selected club members from each participating club.

Club representatives

Club representatives were asked to report demographic information about the club (number of player, number of member, post code of venue); report the presence (or absence) of an exhaustive list of foods and non-alcoholic beverages available from the club canteen. The list was comprised based on unpublished formative evaluation conducted by the research team and published descriptions of foods and beverages sold from junior community sports clubs in Australia³. Club representative were asked to indicate on a 5 point Likert scale (1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree) if they

believed their club should provide a greater variety of healthy food options at their club canteen. In addition, they were read a list of five most commonly identified barriers to healthy food provision (based on barriers frequently reported by managers of school canteens⁷) and asked to indicate if any applied to their club.

Club members

Club members were asked to report their age and gender, followed by the question “what foods (or drinks) do you usually purchase for your own consumption from the clubs canteen or shop’ and read the same and exhaustive list of broad food and beverage item descriptions as were club representatives.

Statistical analyses

Data were analysed using SAS version 9.2. Descriptive statistics were used to in the analysis of the data for all study aims. Consistent with criteria for the classification of school canteen foods and beverages as healthy (‘green foods’),⁷ salads, salad sandwiches, fruit and vegetables were classified as healthy foods; and plain milk, diet soft drink, free and bottled water were classified as healthier drinks. All other food and beverages reportedly available in canteens as described in Figure 1 were classified as less healthy items. Univariate associations between club characteristics (code, size, geographic location), perceived barriers (>2 or <2)) and the availability of healthy food and beverage options were assessed using chi-square tests (or Fischer’s Exact test).

RESULTS

Club and member characteristics

Seventy of the 228 eligible clubs (32%) consented to participate in the study (20 Rugby League, 21 Rugby Union, 12 AFL and 17 Soccer clubs). Sixty one percent had 150 or more players and 86% were located in a major city⁸. Consenting clubs did not differ significantly from non-consenting clubs in football code ($p=0.08$) or location (major city; inner regional; outer regional) ($p=0.66$). Participating clubs provided contact details for

1726 club members, of which 97% (n=1671) were eligible and 1390 (83%) completed the survey. The mean age of participants was 34 years and 82% were male.

Canteen food and beverage availability

Canteen products reportedly available in the 70 club canteens are presented in Figure 1. The most frequently available items were regular soft drinks and potato chips or other salty snacks (available at 99% of clubs). Only 34% of clubs reported selling fresh fruit or vegetables.

Acceptability and barriers

Most club representatives agreed or strongly agreed that clubs should provide a greater variety of healthy food options such as fruit and vegetables at the club canteen (66%, n=46). The most frequently reported barriers to providing healthy food options in club canteens were the perishability of healthy food options (77%, n=54), a perceived lack of demand (76%, n=53), inadequate canteen facilities (44%, n=31), cost (34%, n=24) and lack of knowledge of canteen staff (29%, n=20). Overall, 99% (n=69) of clubs reported at least one barrier.

Associations between availability of healthy options, club characteristics and perceived barriers.

The availability of healthy food and beverage options differed significantly by sports code (Table 1). No other club characteristics were significantly associated with healthy food and beverage availability nor was the number of barriers reported by club representatives (Table 1).

Table 1. Association of club characteristics with availability of healthy food and beverage options at the club canteen

| | Clubs where healthy food and beverage options are available % / (n) | p |
|--|--|---|
|--|--|---|

| | | |
|-------------------|------------|--------|
| Code | | |
| AFL | 75% (n=9) | p=0.04 |
| Rugby League | 35% (n=7) | |
| Rugby Union | 43% (n=9) | |
| Soccer | 24% (n=4) | |
| Club size | | |
| <150 players | 33% (n=9) | p=0.23 |
| >=150 players | 47% (n=20) | |
| Geographic region | | |
| Major City | 43% (n=26) | p=0.22 |
| Inner Regional | 14% (n=1) | |
| Outer Regional | 67% (n=2) | |
| All clubs | 41% (n=29) | |

<Insert Figure 1 here>

Member food and beverage purchases

Overall, 99% (n=1,373) of club members recalled that their club canteen sold food or beverages and were included in further analysis. Of these, 93% (n=1,281) would usually purchase food and 6% (n=86) would usually purchase at least one healthy food item from their club canteen. Among members of clubs which had healthy food options available in their club canteen, 15% (n= 86) of members reported that they would usually purchase a healthy option. Similarly, 97% (n=1,333) of members would usually purchase a beverage and 36% (n=499) would usually purchase at least one healthy beverage. Specific food and beverages usually purchased by members is reported in Figure 1.

DISCUSSION

Consistent with findings of studies with junior clubs in Australia,^{2,3} this study suggests that senior community sports club members typically select, and clubs predominately stock unhealthy food and beverages in sporting club canteens. Such findings highlight an apparent health promotion paradox in this setting, whereby clubs support physical activity through encouraging sports participation but afford few opportunities for members to eat healthily. Improving the food environment of sporting clubs therefore represents an opportunity to normalise healthy eating for child and adult spectators as well as senior players and club officials through the inclusion and promotion of healthy options in club canteens.

Despite broad support among club representatives for providing a greater variety of healthy food, community sports clubs appear to consider such provision a significant challenge. Frequently cited barriers included perception that there was little demand for healthy food, and the expense of stocking healthy, perishable food. Health promotion practitioners have successfully overcome similar barriers reported by managers of school canteens with the aid of support from established associations, through the provision of training for canteen managers and resources such as healthy food suppliers guides (NSW Health). A similar approach may also be successful in achieving improvements in sports club canteens.

The findings of this study should be considered in the context of a number of study limitations. These include the large portion of ineligible clubs, a modest participation rate and the inclusion of male-dominated football codes, which limit the generalisability of the study findings. Furthermore, the reports of club representatives and members are also likely to be influenced by socially desirable responding. Notwithstanding these limitations, the research highlights the need for further research and efforts by health promotion practitioners to improve the availability and promotion of healthy foods in sporting club canteens.

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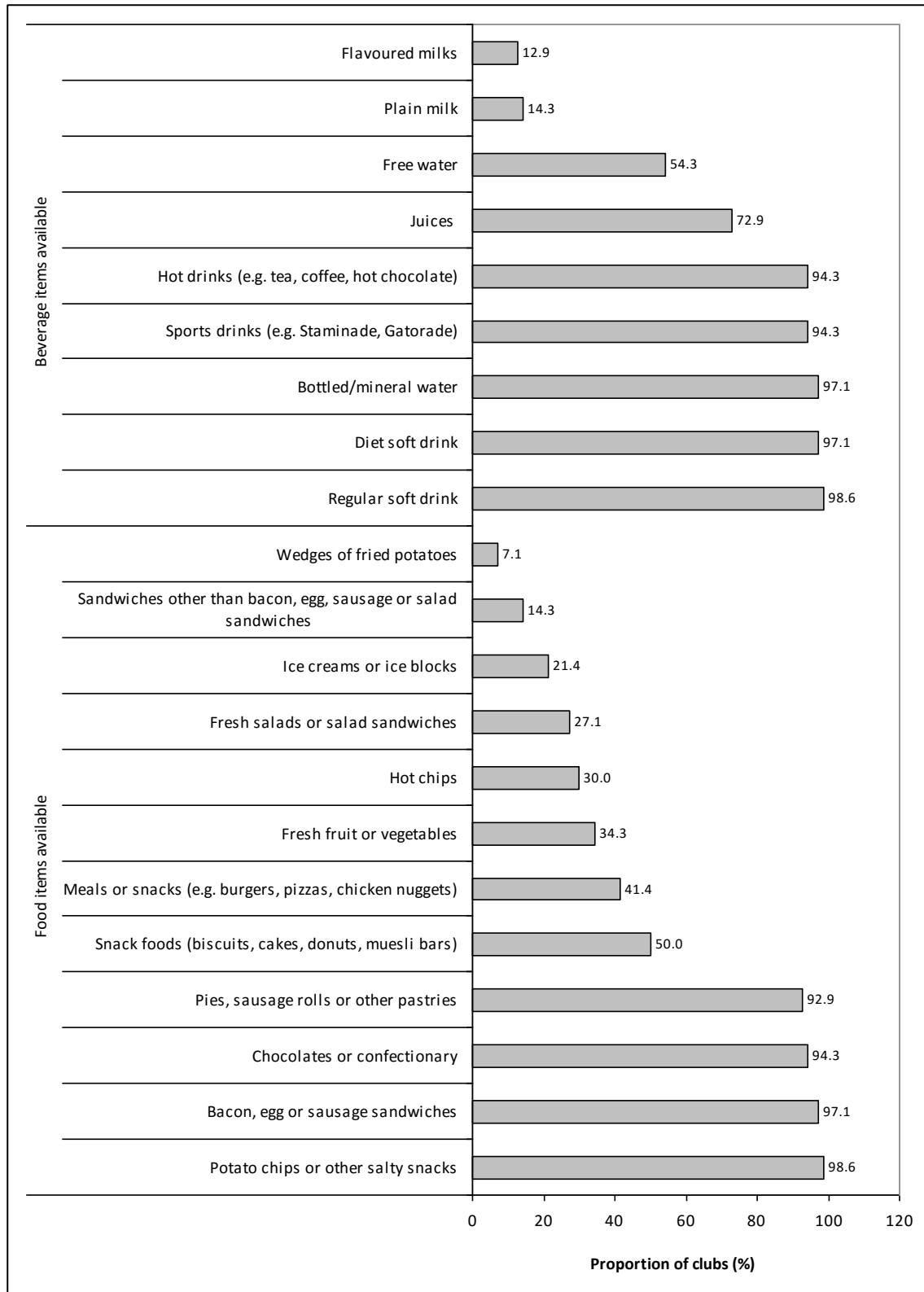


Figure 1: Food and beverage items available at the club canteen, as reported by club representatives