

Proposal for a Comparative Review of Circumpolar Nutritional Guidelines [CircNuGuide]

Rationale

Nutrition is a major determinant of health and different national health authorities, professional organizations, and special interest groups have produced and promoted nutritional and dietary guidelines for consumers to adopt, in the hope of achieving good health or the avoidance of specific diseases. Although the scientific evidence upon which such guidelines are based is presumably universal, guidelines can be very different in their overall emphasis and may even be conflicting in terms of specific recommendations.

The importance of nutrition to the health of circumpolar populations is well documented. Health agencies in circumpolar regions all consider improving the nutritional status of the population a high priority. Given the similarity of geography, climate, and human physiology among circumpolar countries and regions, a comparative review of the different existing nutritional guidelines that are in force and understanding the underlying rationale for differences among them would be instructive for planners of nutritional programs and health care providers.

Indigenous people partly living off the land are a group of special concern. To the extent that specific guidelines exist for this population they are taken into consideration.

Background

Nutritional or dietary guidelines are health promotion and public education tools to promote healthy eating habits among the general public. They generally consist of several recommendations on what food groups to include in each meal, what amounts and how often. Guidelines differ in terms of the amount of detail included, how easy they are to be followed, and the inclusion of information specific to a particular group such as pregnant and nursing women. Guidelines are not legislations or policies, but their contents usually reflect governmental public health policy and decided upon after consultations with expert groups. There is usually scientific documentation to support the recommendations.

All the circumpolar countries have published nutrition guidelines. In addition to national guidelines there are also regional ones, especially in federal states with devolved responsibility for health care, to cater to specific population needs unique to those regions. Guidelines have also been produced (for example by Canada) for indigenous peoples.

Objectives

- Collect published national and regional nutritional guidelines and collate, organize and tabulate their contents and recommendations for comparison;

- Conduct relevant literature review and consultation with experts to understand the rationale for specific recommendations;
- Disseminate information to health agencies across the circumpolar world.

This review is directed at health care providers such as nutritionists, physicians, nurses, health educators and other professionals, health care planners and policy-makers. It is not intended to produce the “ideal” circumpolar guideline but to assemble currently existing information to assist government health agencies and community organizations to design and implement better nutrition policies and programs by learning from other circumpolar countries and regions.

Organization and Management

CircNuGuide is a project of the Arctic Human Health Expert Group [AHHEG], a subsidiary of the Sustainable Development Working Group [SDWG] of the Arctic Council, formed in 2009. AHHEG consists of members nominated by all the Arctic States and Permanent Participants. AHHEG generally meets twice a year when the progress of CircNuGuide is reviewed.

A Steering Committee consisting of representatives of AHHEG and international nutrition experts provides general guidance and oversight on the project. It coordinates international liaison, organizes planning workshops, and supervises the production of reports.

CircNuGuide also draws on the extensive networks of circumpolar health scientists through such organizations as the International Network for Circumpolar Health Research [INCHR], the International Union for Circumpolar Health [IUCH] and the AMAP Health Assessment Group [AMAP-HHAG].

CircNuGuide is managed by the Greenland Institute for Health Research [GIHR] in Nuuk [www.gihr.gl] and the National Institute of Public Health [NIPH] in Copenhagen [www.niph.dk], which provide scientific, technical and administrative support for the project.

Method and Timeline

A doctoral student at the NIPH is assigned to conduct the literature review and searching the internet for guidelines. She has various contacts (government nutritionists, public health officers, directors of health promotion programs, etc) to whom she seeks additional information not available on the web. Some key informant interviews are done to obtain understanding of rationale underlying guidelines’ recommendations.

A preliminary report is expected to be completed by May 2010 and will be used in the course on nutritional assessment at the Summer Institute for Circumpolar Health Research held in Copenhagen.

The preliminary report will be distributed to members of AHHEG and other experts for comments and revision. Individual AHHEG members may distribute and disseminate the report for wider consultations and discussion.

In addition to the collection of nutritional guidelines, a parallel activity is the collection of nutritional policies and strategic plans for improving nutrition status. Such a compilation would be extremely useful for health policy makers.

Project Deliverables

The project as described is a one-time, time-limited project of 2 years' duration. Two deliverables are planned:

(1) A print/electronic document published as a Circumpolar Health Supplement and posted on the website of GIHR and the International Journal of Circumpolar Health. This is expected to be completed by the end of 2010.

(2) PDF files of promotional materials, official documents (eg. policies, action plans, etc), statistical reports, etc, collected as a database of reference materials, also posted on the GIHR website available to users. This is expected to be completed by the summer of 2010.

AHHEG members may decide to pursue additional projects or initiatives related to specific aspects of nutrition making use of the information collected by this project.

Funding

The project is initially undertaken by in-kind contribution from the GIHR, including the stipend of a doctoral student, administrative services, and other research expenses.

Additional costs will be incurred in publication and dissemination of the report. AHHEG in collaboration with the International Journal of Circumpolar Health will include such costs (estimated to be 15 000 euros) in their second year renewal funding application to the Nordic Council of Ministers in October 2010.

SDWG will not be approached for financial support