Reviewer's report

Title: Factors influencing the consumption of seafood among young children in Perth: a qualitative study

Version: Date: 4 April 2007

Reviewer: Wim Verbeke

Reviewer's report:

General

This paper covers an interesting and relevant topic, which fits within the scope of BMC Public Health. The study fills a small part of the gap in current understanding of the role of family referents in determining at home fish consumption.

The main problem with the study relates to the method used, more specifically exploratory focus group discussions, and most particularly, to the very uncritical way the authors deal with the method and with their findings. At several occasions in the text, the authors seem to forget the inherent limitations of this qualitative exploratory method. There is a substantial risk that the belief is raised among readers that the findings from this paper are conclusive, which they are by no means.

The authors should be much more careful in their wording and clearly point to the limitation that their study is exploratory only, and that findings by no means should be taken for granted or extrapolated to the wider public. At the very best, this paper yields some hypotheses that need further substantiation through quantitative studies with larger and representative consumer samples.

A second weakness relates to the discussion, where the authors mainly review previous studies, but do not integrate this with the insights gained from their own study. Links between previous studies and the own findings should be made much more explicit (what insights from the focus groups in Perth match or do not match with what is already reported in the international scientific literature in this field?). This should not be left to the reader to find out.

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Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Abstract: the wording in the current abstract gives the impression that hard evidence will be presented. The authors should avoid words such as “investigate” (better “explore”); “all children” (which children? where? …); and they absolute rephrase their sentence that claims that … “are significant determinants”. Nothing in this study is about determinants (which would imply some kind of association or causality) and nothing in this study shows up as “significant” (which creates the impression that statistical analyses have been performed).

Some statements need further clarification or rephrasing: “Children prefer dishes where they can see the fish …”; this can wrongly be interpreted as “see the fish as a whole”, with head and tail, which is most likely not the case; “Trends in where fish is purchased …” assumes that comparison from the past is made, which is also not the case in this study.

The different verbatim statements are quite informative, but it would be relevant to have some additional information about the kind of person who made the statement. This can be solved by including information about relevant personal characteristics of the person with each statement (living environment, educational background, ethnic background, number of children, …). The background and context from which the statement is made is often not very clear. This details will be extremely helpful for future studies that would test some of the hypotheses this exploratory study yields.

Some very relevant issues have not been mentioned: To what extent do people’s perceptions in this specific study match with scientific evidence or facts related to seafood (see e.g. Verbeke, Sioen et al., Public Health Nutrition 2005). Is fish indeed expensive relative to other proteins in the study region? Has anything been said about allergies, which are quite relevant both with respect to fish and within the scope of the journal? Has health concern or health involvement ever been mentioned as a driver to serving fish to the
children? Similarly, what about interest in meeting dietary recommendations (what are they in Australia with respect to fish?); did consumers mention this as a factor they take into account? Did any of these issues pop up spontaneously in the discussions? If yes, please discuss. If no, why has some of this not been probed for?

As mentioned in the general comments, the discussion needs to better integrate previous findings with current findings, and clearly identify matches and mismatches, which may then be explained by (hypothesized to result from) cross-cultural, methodological, individual or situational differences.

The first and foremost important recommendation should be that the insights collected through this exploratory study require further quantitative validation and substantiation in larger and representative consumer samples. Note that in the current paper, only the first recommendation is a recommendation for further research. All the rest are recommendations for public health, which all have to be weakened substantially since these conclusions are not yet backed up by empirical evidence. At the very best, these should read like suggestions or issues to be considered or taken into account. It is not obvious to recommend that many issues as “should’s” from the limited amount of primary data collected here. Only when this primary data is adequately integrated with previous findings in this field, can the recommendations be credibly maintained.

The conclusions should explicitly repeat that this study is exploratory, including the implications this has with respect the interpretation of the findings.

---------------------------- Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct) ----------------------------

---------------------------- Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore) ----------------------------

Introduction – Background: the part about health beliefs from eating fish is quite extended, but does not particularly refer to young children or it is not linked with children and family issues at all (e.g. seafood could improve future health of young consumers or so). It could mention the emerging obesity/overweight problem among children, and the potential role of stimulating seafood consumption in this problematic. There is no link with literature about the role of children on family buying and/or consumption, e.g. Caruana & Vassallo (J Consumer Marketing 2003); Rose, Bouch & Shoham (J Business Research 2002).

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have not competing interests.