

Malta Journal of Health Sciences – Journal of the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Malta  
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## **Aim and scope**

The Malta Journal of Health Sciences is a peer-reviewed, open access publication that promotes the sharing and exchange of knowledge in Health Sciences. It provides a platform for novice and established researchers to share their findings, insights and views within an inter-professional context. The Journal originates within the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Malta.

The Malta Journal of Health Sciences disseminates research on a broad range of allied health disciplines. It publishes original research papers, review articles, short communications, commentaries, letters to the editor and book reviews. The readership of the journal consists of academics, practitioners and trainee health professionals across the disciplines of Applied Biomedical Science, Audiology, Communication Therapy, Community Nursing, Environmental Health, Food Science, Health Services Management, Medical Physics, Mental Health, Midwifery, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Podiatry and Radiography.

Submitted manuscripts undergo independent blind peer review, typically by two reviewers with relevant expertise. All manuscripts are reviewed as rapidly as possible and an editorial decision is generally reached within approximately two months of submission. Authors of manuscripts that require revisions will have two weeks to submit their revised manuscripts. No manuscript that has already been published or is under consideration for publication elsewhere will be considered.

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## Contents

Malta Journal of Health Sciences Volume 7 – Issue 2 (2020)

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Guest editorial

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**04 Public health nutrition: current challenges and reflections**

Claire Copperstone

Head, Department of Food Sciences and Nutrition, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Malta.

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Research paper

---

**06 Fear of COVID-19 and its impact on Maltese University students' wellbeing and substance abuse**

Jamie Bonnici, Marilyn Clark, Andrew Azzopardi

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Commentary

---

**16 COVID made me do it ... The Physiotherapist's role in self-management**

Amy Dimech

*Guest Editorial*

## **Public health nutrition: current challenges and reflections.**

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Public Health Nutrition is that branch of nutrition that deals with the promotion of health and disease prevention and encompasses nutrition-related topical global and community health issues. Public health nutrition priorities and recommendations are continuously reviewed and updated to remain relevant for the times and populations in context.

Many populations face health-related challenges, which can be attributed, at least partly, to poor quality diets. Today there is strong evidence on the role diet plays in overall health and wellbeing and the ensuing health consequences due to the consumption of unhealthy diets.

Malnutrition, both in the forms of underweight and obesity, is one concerning diet related health issue we are facing today. According to recent World Health Organization (WHO) global statistics, for adults alone, 1.9 billion adults suffer from overweight or obesity, with another 462 million suffering from underweight (WHO, 2020). In the case of children, stunting, wasting, overweight and obesity all remain major concerns. Furthermore obesity, traditionally considered a disease of the affluent, is now also being experienced in low and middle-income countries, with some reporting the burden of both over and undernutrition concurrently (WHO, 2020). High obesity and overweight prevalence is also a major concern for the Maltese population. For Maltese adults alone, 69.75% of Maltese adults were estimated to be affected by overweight or obesity in a

recent local cross-sectional study carried out (Cuschieri et al, 2016).

We still have not managed to find the solution to this complex global health issue despite various strategies and action plans adopted. Different countries need to tackle the specific causes and the best approaches in a targeted way whilst drawing on lessons learnt from the countries that have reported some success in their efforts.

The 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) provide a united call for action for global health and education, to reduce poverty and disparities and to protect our planet. They take into account the myriad of global public health challenges we face today, and present targets to be achieved by 2030. Food and nutrition feature prominently in most, if not all, of the goals (United Nations, 2016). The Global Nutrition Report (2020) describes the need to look at the pressing global issue of climate change, and how this affects nutrition and food systems. The report also highlights the problem of nutrition inequities, and the need to protect the most vulnerable from poor nutritional consequences. One of the key main messages is that poor quality diets are not merely due to poor choice but could be due to lack of affordability and other key contributors. The recent statistics compiled by the National Statistics Office (NSO) for Malta reveals an at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate (AROPe) of 20.1% in 2019, which is an increase from the estimated 19.0% in 2018 (NSO, 2020). We cannot ignore these statistics in these challenging times and should be considered in any strategy planning with health at its core.

Tackling the problem of food waste is also another key area of concern in public health nutrition today with many countries still reporting high levels of wasted food. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United

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Nations (FAO, 2011) reports about a third of our food is wasted or lost on a global level. An interdisciplinary approach is required with all involved working together to manage global food waste throughout all the steps within the food supply chain. These actions could help address food insecurity and hunger at least in part, whilst also helping to reduce the negative effects on climate change. A consistent message is needed with international and local dietary guidelines always reflecting the urgent need to address the climate change issue by continuing to promote sustainable diets. Improved access to healthy and sustainably sourced foods whilst ensuring the efficient functioning of local food systems from the farm to the fork are important considerations in public health nutrition.

Writing about the challenges in public health nutrition in 2020 cannot be complete without considering the COVID-19 pandemic, and the major disruptions it caused on all global systems. The negative repercussions of COVID-19 on public health, including nutrition, and the need to tackle different issues together is certainly one of the most drastic and pressing problems public health professionals have had to deal with in recent years. There is a dire responsibility to ensure the correct evidence based advice is provided to our populations. Other public health concerns, however, also remain just as relevant today and still require our consideration and action.

The challenges faced in public health nutrition are not just for public health nutritionists to consider. Collaboration is needed between all main stakeholders to address these challenges. We all have a responsibility as key players and, as health professionals, we need to understand our specific roles in the concerted action needed to provide the change.

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