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Pre-Budget Submission 2025-26

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The Problem

There remains a high and unacceptable risk of malnutrition among older Australians both for those living in aged care homes and for those living at home.

The issue for those living in aged care homes was recognised and flagged as a priority by the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. While Government, with the cooking, catering and nutrition community, aged care providers, vocational education sector, aged care staff and the Maggie Beer Foundation, are working to change this, systemic, sustainable change is far from embedded. Two of the most urgent issues are –

- The absence of any accredited practical training available anywhere in Australia for aged care cooks and chefs. Cooks and chefs, in undertaking one of the most difficult roles in aged care, desperately need on the ground support and training to meet the complex needs of frail older Australians.
- Major industry gaps in knowledge and skills about flavour, nutrition, food and dining needs, food preparation techniques, workflow and kitchen requirements to adequately support residents of aged care.

For older people living in their own home, particularly as they rely more on others for support, there is an increased likelihood of poor access to good food (including to meet altered nutritional needs generated by the burden of disease) and consequent risks of malnutrition. While there has been increasing focus on food in aged care homes, the issues and solutions for food at home are relatively unexplored.

Our Proposals

We offer two proposals for consideration.

	Per annum	Over 3 years
Proposal 1 - Extend the Improving Food in Aged Care through Education and Training program	\$4,000,000	\$12,000,000
Proposal 2 - Project focused on solutions for older people receiving aged care at home	\$1,100,000	\$3,300,000
Total	\$5,100,000	\$15,300,000

PROPOSAL 1 - Extend the *Improving Food in Aged Care through Education and Training program*

The Maggie Beer Foundation, with funding from the Federal Government, rolled out its Trainer Mentor Program (TMP) to provide comprehensive, sustainable and hands-on training and capacity building on a national basis for cooks, chefs, catering teams and others responsible for the food and dining experience in aged care homes.

The 2024 MYEFO statement included an additional \$1.7m to supplement existing funding for the program which, without new funding, will finish in mid 2026. While the 2024 MYEFO funding is critical to the momentum of the program, our experience and the independent evaluation being undertaken by HealthConsult suggest that funding must be increased and our ambitions for the reach of the program extended if we are to create significant improvement at scale.

We therefore urge that \$4 million per annum is allocated on a longer term basis, and for a minimum of three years.

The TMP is delivered by our unique Foundation Trainer Chefs who are supported by the Foundation to keep up to date with emerging knowledge and expertise in aged care food and dining, and who have advanced skills and knowledge in cooking and dining, aged care and training and mentoring processes.

This extension would enable the successful features of the current program to continue with TMP as the key deliverable, supported by the Professional Community, Online Learning Modules and State and Territory Hubs (virtual short courses). Specifically, \$12m over 3 years would -

- Extend the TMP program and Hubs to run until mid-2029 in the first instance to more than 200 additional homes over the period and achieving a total reach of more than 350 of the almost 2,700 aged care homes across Australia.
- Research, scope and produce new Online Learning Modules with appropriate experts and based on learning needs identified through the current program and stakeholder engagement.
- Support the growing online Professional Community of Aged Care Cooks and Chefs to receive curated access to a moderated online forum, current topic updates, access to recipes and resources, discussion groups and timely, expert responses to member inquiries.
- Produce resources for a broader stakeholder group (such as carers, community members, clinicians and aged care managers) including tools, 'small bite' information sessions with subject experts, webinars, resources and Fact Sheets addressing common issues.
- Continue the development of a library of scalable recipes, developed and trialled especially for aged care, including the process for texture modification and nutrition information.

The TMP is largely offered onsite, where a Maggie Beer Foundation Chef Trainer works beside staff for a total of 16 days over a 12-month period. It includes consideration of factors such as:

- Developing flavour through key cooking skills and techniques, combining a variety of complementary flavours, sourcing seasonal produce and creating balance between the 5 flavour profiles including across texture modified meals
- Meeting the nutritional needs of older people (particularly protein) to prevent malnutrition and fortification using a food first approach
- Running an efficient kitchen with adequate resourcing and rostering, efficient workflow, accessing and creating standard recipes suitable for aged care, staff training on existing kitchen equipment and strategies to get ahead (e.g. cooking in bulk)
- Dining experience by creating welcoming spaces to dine, bringing aroma into the dining room to stimulate appetite, supporting independence and involving residents through regular and ongoing feedback mechanisms.

Funding required \$12,000,000 over 3 years.

PROPOSAL 2 - Project focused on solutions for older people receiving aged care at home

We propose funding for a collaborative project focused on older people receiving aged care in their own homes, examining and making recommendations about the range of options and models that will support improved nutrition, food and social dining for frail older people living at home including those living alone.

The Foundation believes, through the formation of an ‘alliance group’ of community organisations including those delivering meals, there is an opportunity to research the needs and options for frail older people receiving meals as part of aged care in their own home.

Most older people, including frail older people needing aged care, do not live in aged care homes. Too often a factor prompting the need for residential aged care is the risk of malnutrition where older people are simply not eating well enough to maintain good condition. This has often followed months (and years) of inadequate nutrition, loneliness and not being able, motivated or interested in enjoying food.

We know much less about this as a problem – and the potential solutions - than we should.

There are few Australian studies of the prevalence of undernourishment among those living in the community and sample sizes are small.¹ However, according to a study undertaken by Access Economics for Meals on Wheels in 2011, inadequate nutrition is potentially common among older people living in the community — ranging between 30 and 47%. The reasons for poor nutrition included –

- poor health causing reduced mobility, fatigue, and frailty
- polypharmacy leading to decreased appetite
- dentition, chewing and swallowing disorders
- lack of social support
- reduced ability to shop
- low income
- poor food and nutrition knowledge; and
- lack of interest and motivation, particularly when alone

More recently cost of living pressures have prompted some older households to put a low priority on fresh, good food.

While older people (and those who care for them) increasingly understand that exercise is an essential part of ageing well and avoiding falls, the place of good food and proper nutrition is not nearly as well understood. We can counter the “anorexia of ageing”² with a better understanding of the importance of food as we age, including the need to pivot narratives away from a fear of obesity to preventing malnutrition.

But our experience tells us that we will not succeed in addressing nutrition if the process is medicalised or food turned into nutrition doses or transactions. Food which stimulates the senses, is flavourful and which can be enjoyed in the company of others is much more likely to support required nutrition levels.

This project will be led by the Foundation, and feature collaboration across existing and emerging stakeholders, adopting the approach the Foundation used to host the first National Congress on Food and Dining in Aged Care in 2021. It will provide an analysis of –

- the gaps, issues and opportunities through a literature search, surveys and workshops
- an examination of the products, options and solutions
- a blueprint for next steps.

Funding required \$3,300,000 over 3 years.

¹ p9, *Cost benefit analysis of an intervention to improve the nutritional status of community dwelling older Australians, for MOWA by Access Economics, 2011*

² For example, https://researchnow-admin.flinders.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/76540712/Han_Individualized_P2023.pdf

About the Maggie Beer Foundation

The Maggie Beer Foundation is determined to improve the food experience and quality of life for current and future generations of older people.

For more than 10 years, the Foundation has been advocating, educating, collaborating, facilitating research and sharing the latest knowledge and skills with cooks and chefs in aged care. We do this through our online education modules, our professional hands-on Trainer Mentor Chef Programs, our Learning Hubs, our moderation of a professional community for aged care cooks and chefs, and our contribution to research and policy development.

We are committed to working with others to better understand and address the very real risk of malnutrition among older people living in their own homes, including those who live alone, and who, for a range of reasons, face barriers to enjoying healthy, delicious food.

We can bring about life-altering change to the well-being of older people through access to food full of flavour and nutrients.

As Maggie says,

“Food is the fuel of life, of great conversation and memorable meals. Its substance is far more than just the nutrients acquired in the act of eating. It’s the knowledge of loving preparation, the anticipation of sharing a meal and the delicious pleasure of engaging all our senses as we eat. Food is nutrition not just for the body, but also for the soul. It’s what fires our appetite for life, no matter what age. Every mouthful counts as we age and the Foundation’s resources and reach aspire to work every day to make good food and good eating the reality for each and every older Australian.”

Our approach is focused on supporting staff to understand the importance of food, and their own role in its production and delivery. This leads to improved retention in the aged care industry of cooks and chefs who are otherwise at risk of being lost to hospitality roles.

Beyond our direct training role, the Maggie Beer Foundation has, for more than a decade, been the leading advocate for improved vocational training and for research that improves the understanding of the relationship between food and emotional and physical wellbeing.

A current project, funded by Skills SA and undertaken by the Foundation in partnership with TAFE SA, has begun a serious analysis of the training needs of cooks, chefs and kitchen hands in aged care. While this will take some time, we very much hope that the next step will be vocational training gap analysis, the development of new vocational training programs and then national take up.

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