

An assessment of South African college and university dining policies and procedures regarding handling of food allergies

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Sir,

Food allergy is defined as 'sensitisation to a food with a convincing history of a reaction to the food in the preceding year, or a positive food challenge'.¹ In the past, food allergy incidences in South Africa were scarce, especially in the black population group; but, researchers are of the opinion that South Africa is now joining the second wave of the food allergy epidemic.² Limited research has been done on food allergies in South Africa.³ Even though the prevalence of food allergies in South Africa is rising, there are still no local guidelines⁴ to mitigate suitable risk reducing strategies. Therefore, the primary way of reducing food allergies and related symptoms is strict avoidance of the causative food.⁴ In doing so, these individuals may be reducing the nutritional status of their diet,⁴ which can lead to a lack of energy and as a result decreased activity and fatigue as well as a lack of essential macro and micronutrients that in some cases result in decreased growth and in rare cases scurvy and pellagra.⁵ The chance of following an unbalanced diet due to avoidance of food causing allergic reactions can also result in increased food intake and consequently obesity.⁵

In the case of students lodging in university residences to avoid food causing allergic reactions is a tall order. In residence food halls, prepared meals are not accompanied with food labels and students cannot be sure of the ingredients of the food. Additionally, no formal guidelines regarding food preparation practices have been developed to guide university foodservice establishments to cater for students with these dietary requirements.

The purpose of this study was to determine views of college and university dining directors (CUDD) on food allergy handling policies and practices in South Africa.

A web-questionnaire developed by Choi & Rajagopal⁶ was minimally modified and limited to demographic questions only, and distributed to CUDD's at 23 tertiary South Africa institutions.

Eight CUDD's completed the questionnaire resulting in a response rate of 35%. Most institutions that responded prepared their meals on-site ($n = 2$) while the remaining used both on-site and commissary kitchens. Foodservice at six universities was managed by a contract company while the remaining were managed by a combination of contract and self-operated ($n = 2$). CUDD's indicated there were no incidences of food allergy reactions on their campus ($n = 5$), while others did not know ($n = 3$). All respondents ($n = 8$) indicated they had no specific food allergen handling policies (formal or informal) at the executive management level. Only two respondents indicated that they

had policies in place at the foodservice unit level for handling food allergens. Those institutions which responded and indicated the presence of policies at the foodservice management level were in place for 2 years ($n = 1$) and 1 month ($n = 1$). Seven respondent institutions indicated that they were not in the process of finalising any formal policies for food allergens. In the absence of formal policies at the institutional or foodservice level, students were advised to check with the dining hall/foodservice unit manager each time before eating ($n = 3$), consult with the university dietitian to discuss the food allergy/ies and menu options ($n = 3$), inform the dining hall staff before the beginning of the term but no further action is taken by the foodservice department ($n = 3$), or sign a disclaimer that relieved the institution of legal liability in the event of an allergic reaction ($n = 1$).

Overall, respondent institutions had positive attitudes towards the importance of prevention of food allergic reactions on campus and believed policies should be in place for handling students with food allergies and meal requests. Respondent institutions were also knowledgeable about food allergies and prevention; however, this was not reflected in presence of policies for handling food allergic students, which is of serious concern. Therefore, there is a need for South African universities to move in the direction of developing and implementing these policies. Policy development should involve firstly obtaining input from individuals across the organisation then implemented, and revised as needed. The importance of prevention of food allergic reactions on campus should be elevated as an essential policy that needs to be put in place, especially with the rising incidences of food allergies in South Africa and the growing number of students of all races attending tertiary institutions.

The limitations of this study is that the sample for this study was small and hence further research should be conducted to obtain in-depth understanding of ways in which universities can be prepared to serve food allergic students and making dining at universities a safe and pleasant experience. However, this is the first preliminary study of its kind in South Africa that explored the presence of food allergy policies in university dining settings.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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