

Australasian Science

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PATRONS: *Australasian Science* is supported by Nobel Laureate Professor Peter Doherty and renowned science broadcaster Robyn Williams, representing excellence in science and its communication.

AUSTRALASIAN SCIENCE IS PUBLISHED BY Control Publications P/L, Box 2155, Wattleree Rd PO, VIC 3145, Australia
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\$64 (individuals) including GST
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ADVERTISING INFORMATION

Rates and specifications are available from australasianscience.com.au

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PUBLISHED 10 times per year. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the publisher.

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Distributed by Gordon & Gotch Ltd

Printed by BPA Print Group, 11 Evans St, Burwood, Vic. 3125, Australia.

Print Post Approved PP 331379/0032.

ISSN 1442-679X.

*RRP only \$7.95, including GST.

Australia's national research agency, CSIRO, has undermined its international reputation for scientific excellence by promoting its best-selling book, *The CSIRO Total Wellbeing Diet*, as "the scientifically proven diet for Australians" and "the weight loss program that really works".

It would be good news indeed if CSIRO has found the Holy Grail of diets, but any trials with relatively small groups – which is what this diet is based on – inevitably have large margins of error, and critics have started to pull them apart (see pp.21–22).

Leading international science journal *Nature* pointed out that CSIRO has mortgaged its reputation for a diet that is manifestly not "proven". Where multiple factors are at work, like the effect of dietary regimes on human health, cause-and-effect relationships require randomised and controlled trials with large populations over long periods. However, CSIRO's diet is based on a trials of less than 100 people held over only 12 weeks.

This is where the issues swirling around CSIRO's communications director, former tobacco lobbyist Donna Staunton, become critical. If CSIRO had engaged someone with scientific standing and broad media experience in her role, the organisation would have sensed danger from the start and insisted that CSIRO be straight with the public by making carefully qualified statements instead of the broad claims made on the book's cover and in its promotional material.

CSIRO's unbending stance has the potential to hugely damage its scientific standing and respect, which had been hard-won over decades by disinterested scientists working for the public good rather than commercial gain.

Clearly there has been overkill in the book's presentation and publicity, but this cannot be sheeted home solely to the industry sponsors that have benefited from the diet's recommendations. The claims are all over CSIRO's own publications and statements.

With CSIRO investing much of its prestige in promoting the unambiguous claim that its diet is "scientifically proven", the organisation now needs to explain its standards of scientific proof.

It would be a tragedy for CSIRO and Australian science if CSIRO's diet was seen internationally as just another short-lived fad. Humble pie might become the necessary diet for its executives.

COVER STORY

The Commonwealth Games comes to Australia this month and with it, no doubt, allegations that some athletes are cheating by using performance-enhancing drugs. In one survey, more than half of athletes said they would take a drug to win a world championship even if it meant they would be dead within 5 years. Sporting authorities believe that the next frontier in performance-enhancing drugs will be at the genetic level, and that the first GM athletes may even be competing at the Olympic Games in 2008. The race to develop tests for performance-enhancing genes is now on (see pp.17–18).



Image: Jamie Turfey Model: Wayne Young