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The reaction

Got the bacon blues? It's not all over for swine time

Harriet Alexander

Before the World Health Organisation released its findings on the link between meats and cancer, its authors expected a backlash against any perceived criticism of bacon.

University of NSW cancer researcher Bernard Stewart, who chaired the committee that conducted the review, said in comments ahead of the release: "No one's proposing that we ban bacon, put warnings on hot dogs or take beef off the barbie. But this WHO review provides compelling evidence that the long-term high consumption of red meat and/or processed meat increases your risk of cancer."

Nevertheless, within hours of the report's release, Nationals senator Barnaby Joyce said the cohabitation of sausages and tobacco smoke within a carcinogenic category rendered the exercise a "farce".

"If you got everything that the

WHO said was carcinogenic and took it out of your daily requirement then you are kind of heading into a cave," Mr Joyce told the *ABC*. Asked about whether meat should be in the same group as tobacco, Mr Joyce said: "No, it should not be compared to cigarettes and obviously that would make the whole thing a farce."

Critics were claiming a vegan conspiracy; and one Fairfax reader called for a ban on hot dogs at children's birthday parties.

Based on the evidence contained within 1000 previous studies, the WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer put processed meat in the top carcinogenic category, along with tobacco smoking, UV rays and outdoor air pollution, and red meat in the same category as wood fires.

But Professor Stewart said it was "a distortion" to equate red meat and processed meat with



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cigarettes. For one thing, the categories represent the WHO's degree of certainty that those factors cause cancer, and not the likelihood that they will cause cancer.

Secondly, for Mr Joyce's benefit, "sausages" as they are defined in the list refers to processed meat such as salami and frankfurters, not the fresh bangers that are favoured at Australian barbecues.

The report was one of the most complex assessments of literature undertaken concerning a cancer risk, Professor Stewart said.

The recommended quantity of red meat is 450 grams a week.

Nutritionist Rosemary Stanton, who helped draft the guidelines, said the studies that informed the WHO report had also been used to set the guidelines, and they remained appropriate.

But Australians were eating far too much meat – men eating on average 700g a week and women 520g a week, a recent survey found.

"We're among the highest in the world," Ms Stanton said. "We also have among the highest incidences of bowel cancer in the world. The average person is eating larger amounts of meat more often, and it's a matter of quantity."

Meat and Livestock Australia said it supported the national dietary guidelines: "Red meat such as beef and lamb is a critical, natural source of iron and zinc, vitamin B12 and omega-3 – essential nutrients needed to keep the body and brain

functioning well. There is no reason to believe that eating beef and lamb as part of a healthy, balanced diet and lifestyle in 100g to 200g portion sizes (raw weight), three to four times a week as recommended in the Australian Dietary Guidelines, will increase the risk of cancer."

Cancer Council Victoria's epidemiology centre director, Graham Giles, who named processed meats as a carcinogen in a 2004 study, said the evidence that the WHO had amassed put almost beyond doubt that they caused cancer, but the risk of an individual being affected was still low.

To put it into perspective, high consumers of processed meats were about 1.3 times more likely to develop cancer, whereas smokers were 20 times more likely.

"You don't have to give up bacon," Professor Giles said. "I'm not going to."

► **Rosemary Stanton** – Page17



Speaking out: Barnaby Joyce and Rosemary Stanton.