



# ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY FOOD & HEALTH FORUM



## The UK salt reduction campaign & food reformulation

5-6.30pm, Tuesday 11 November 2008

Committee Room 7, House of Commons

### Introduction

**Lord Rea** welcomed members and the guest speakers to the meeting. He explained that the significance of salt in relation to heart disease is that it is responsible for raising blood pressure in a high proportion of the population. A small proportion of the population are fortunate in that they do not risk higher levels of blood pressure as a result of eating salt. The issue of food reformulation is important because a high proportion of the salt we eat, some 75%, is derived from processed food.

Lord Rea introduced the two guest speakers, Maura Gillespie and Nigel Dickie, and said that two FSA representatives, Adam Treslove and Victoria Targett, would be happy to respond to any questions about the FSA's recent consultation on their salt reduction campaign.

### **Maura Gillespie, Head of Policy and Public Affairs, British Heart Foundation**

Maura said that the British Heart Foundation (BHF) is working at two levels in support of the UK salt reduction campaign. It is lobbying at a national level and undertaking outreach work in the community.

Too much salt in the diet can cause high blood pressure (hypertension) which is a key risk factor for the onset of heart disease. The World Health Organisation has estimated that in developed countries, it accounts for over 50% of heart disease and almost 75% of strokes. Around three in ten adults in England have high blood pressure: 31% of men and 28% of women. The target for the general population is to have a blood pressure below 140/85 or, for people who have had a heart attack or who have CHD, the target is 130/80.

Some 2.5m people in the UK are living with coronary heart disease and it claims around 200,000 lives a year (1 in 3 deaths). Heart and circulatory disease costs the UK £14.4 billion each year.

The BHF focuses on persuading people to choose foods that are lower in salt because 75% of a person's salt intake comes from prepared food. The BHF has a range of leaflets and also uses its website to provide information. The BHF also seeks to raise awareness and it campaigns to persuade the food industry to reformulate their products so that they are lower in salt. It also campaigns in support of measures to make it easier for people to see the salt content in their food. Among the issues the BHF has raised are: the need to replace the use of "sodium" on food labels with "salt" and the value of traffic light front-of-pack labelling which makes it easy for consumers to make fast, easy choices. The BHF hopes that, following the review of different labelling schemes, the FSA will bring forward a front-of-pack labelling scheme that helps consumers make easy choices.

The BHF has worked with the FSA campaign to raise awareness of the 6g/day of salt target. The FSA and BHF co-branded a leaflet which includes low-salt recipes and tips on how to avoid 'hidden

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salt' in the diet. The FSA has also given the BHF funding to support a project designed to help South Asians reduce the salt intake in their diet.

South Asian men living in the UK have a higher risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke than other men. Adding salt during cooking is a near universal practice in South Asian cooking and 35% of South Asian men add salt at the table. Only 6% of South Asian people know about the 6g/day of salt target.

The BHF project encouraged healthy social cooking in Sikh Gurdwaras and Hindu Temples in Britain. The overall aim of the "Social Cooking Project" was to reduce the salt consumption in the cooking for congregations in these places of worship by 5%, in order to reduce levels of cardiovascular disease in these groups. The project also sought to empower local communities served by these places of worship to make healthier eating choices. Twenty major places of worship were targeted (congregations varied in size from 25 to 3000 people) in London, Birmingham, Bradford, Cardiff and Watford. The overall target audience was some 50,000 people.

The BHF sent dietitians to meet the volunteers who regularly do the cooking for these congregations. The BHF also talked to the congregations to explain why it is important to eat less salt, the importance of reading labels and how South Asian cooking can be prepared with lower amounts of salt without compromising on taste by making creative use of spices. The endorsement of this project by the religious leaders helped enormously. The BHF prepared healthy cooking guides for the volunteer cooks, which included 60 salt-free recipes. The BHF also produced an advert to support the campaign which was shown on Asian television stations during the 6 months the project lasted. The BHF measured the amount of salt in the food served before, during and after the project so that they could assess the success of the project. The results showed the project achieved a near 10% reduction in salt intake in most places and at least 5% in all of them.

The BHF also introduced the salt reduction message into its "Healthy Ramadan" campaign, training over 200 Imams and health advisors about the positive heart health benefits of a reduction in salt intake levels. The "Healthy Ramadan" campaign encourages Muslims to make positive lifestyle changes during the holy month of Ramadan. The BHF has also been holding stalls at Melas (Asian community events) since 2002. The BHF visits an average of 12 major events across the UK each summer because Melas provide an excellent opportunity to deliver health messages to all ages and social groups.

The BHF believes that for its community work to be successful, industry needs to play its part by reducing salt in processed food and by accepting the traffic light labelling scheme on food. We also need to protect children from high salt diets by ending the marketing of foods high in fat salt and sugar (HFSS) before the 9pm watershed because many children watch programmes, such as *The X Factor*, which are not covered by the present ban.

**Baroness Gibson** of Market Rasen asked why South Asian men are more at risk than South Asian women. **Lord Rea** said men generally have a higher risk of CVD than women because they are more susceptible to the risk factors for CVD and this may be exacerbated in the South Asian population because the men tend to smoke and the women do not.

#### **Nigel Dickie, Director of Corporate and Government Affairs, HJ Heinz**

Nigel Dickie said he was grateful for the opportunity to share the experience Heinz had accrued over 20 years of work in the area of food reformulation to reduce its salt content. Too much salt is bad for you and we do eat too much salt. Tastes change over time, but we need to remember that people eat food, not policies, and taste sells food. If the food industry forgets that, it does so at its peril. The key lesson Heinz has learnt is the need to make changes gradually so that they are accepted by the consumer.

HJ Heinz began selling food in clear glass jars in 1869, so that his customers could see what it looked like, in contrast to his competitors. He also avoided artificial preservatives and additives. In the UK the company is best known for its soups, sauces, ketchup and beans.

Heinz embarked on a programme of gradually reducing the salt content of their products in the 1980s, as concern grew about the links between salt intake and heart disease. Heinz found it important to change products gradually or it lost customers. Additionally, if the salt content of products changes dramatically, people just add more salt to their food.

We need to remember that salt is just one issue in relation to diet and health, which needs to be balanced against a range of other issues. It is important, therefore, to keep the issue of salt in perspective. We need to raise consumer education and awareness, but the important thing is to change behaviour. Outside of its core ranges and gradual salt reduction programme, Heinz is still struggling to see enthusiasm from consumers for markedly lower salt products. Two popular products – Heinz ketchup and beans – have been produced in reduced salt and sugar versions, but the sales of these products are low (only 3% of sales of all beans and ketchup). This is important because if they do not sell, retailers will not want to stock them.

The FSA should be commended, along with a range of NGOs, for trying to reduce the salt intake of the UK population. It is a long journey. When SACN produced its 6g/day recommendation in 2003, the average salt intake was 9.5g a day. The average salt intake now is 8.6g a day.

Project Neptune is a good example of a collaborative effort on the part of major players in the soups and sauces sector coming together with the aim of reducing the salt content of their products by 10% year on year for three years. This was a unique collaboration between competitors and it was a great success in reducing the salt content of these products.

Heinz is not blinded by targets, but looks to see what can be achieved step by step in line with consumer preferences. It has already made substantial changes to its products, reducing the salt content of standard Heinz Beans (-32%), Heinz Alphabeti Pasta Shapes (-31%), Heinz Tomato Soup (-32%) and Heinz Thomas the Tank Engine Pasta Shapes (-59%). Overall Heinz is now using 19% less salt than a year ago and Heinz expects to meet the FSA 2010 targets for these product ranges.

If there is any tension between regulators and the food industry, then it often relates to starting points and end points. Regulators focus on the end point - a target for reduced salt content - and the food industry focuses on starting points – their existing products. The other source of tension is the time period allowed for change. Heinz could produce no salt/no sugar products now, but they would not sell.

During the second phase of the FSA salt reduction campaign, Heinz supported the campaign by flagging up with messages on its food labels, the “check out my salt level” message. In 1986 Heinz was one of the first of the major food producers to provide information about key ingredients on its labels and it is happy to support the FSA campaign. The FSA should be commended for working with stakeholders as partners. Heinz was able to support the current salt campaign because it was told about it months before it was launched. There are broader lessons to be derived from this.

For all stakeholders to work in partnership, trust and understanding is needed. We need achievable targets so we can take consumers with us. We also need positive messages. Consumers should not be bombarded with information about what they cannot eat, but told about what they can eat. The food industry must sell food, so we need to take consumers with us.

The great food debate involves a wide range of stakeholders, including Government, health professionals, food producers, NGOs, the media and consumers. We need better education, better tasting products and better dialogue. The goal should be a food industry that is “doing well by doing good.”

**Lord Rea** thanked Nigel for his presentation and commended Heinz's example, saying that if all food producers reduced the salt content of their products by 32%, as Heinz had done with some of their products, we would be close to achieving the 6g a day target.

## Questions

**Dr Paul Berryman** of Leatherhead Food International (LFI) said that independent research carried out by LFI confirmed Nigel's point that gradual reductions in salt content are needed or consumers simply buy alternative products or add more salt at the table. Paul also referred to the use of nanotechnology, which can be used to create an enhanced salt sensation which disguises actual reductions in salt content of up to 35-40%.

**Earl Baldwin of Bewdley** asked whether the 6g a day target was a political or scientific target. **Vicky Targett** of the FSA confirmed that the reference nutrient intake for 97% of the population is actually 4g a day, but SACN had recommended a 6g a day target because it was thought to be achievable. **Earl Baldwin** asked whether the higher (6g/day) target might discourage people who would aim for the 4g/day from achieving it, because they were unaware of it. **Vicky** suggested that people who are seeking to eat healthily will be reducing their salt intake as much as possible in any case.

**The Countess of Mar** asked for confirmation that in speaking about deaths from heart disease, Maura Gillespie was referring to premature deaths and **Maura** confirmed that she was indeed speaking about deaths before the age of 75. **The Countess of Mar** suggested that people who live in hot climates tend to eat more salt, so it may be that South Asians in the UK are eating more salt in traditional recipes and are thus more susceptible to heart disease. **Lord Rea** noted a difference between East Africans who tend to have low blood pressure and West Africans who tend to have higher blood pressure. West Africans do not eat a lot of salt in their traditional diet, but appear very sensitive to the salt in European diets.

**Dr Gary Stephenson** of Proctor & Gamble expressed concern about the emphasis on salt as a risk factor for high blood pressure and heart disease, saying obesity, alcohol intake and the level of exercise are all more important risk factors so it is necessary to keep the issue of salt in perspective. He also said that recent research suggested that the significance of salt as a risk factor seems to be related to sensitivity to potassium intake and that the evidence considered by SACN was based on research trials that did not control for potassium levels. He argued not that we should not seek to reduce the salt content of food, but that targets should be based on accurate and up to date scientific evidence.

**Professor Jack Winkler** of London Metropolitan University asked Nigel Dickie whether he thought the food industry as a whole was as supportive of the salt reduction campaign as Heinz had been. **Nigel** said his perception is that the food industry supports the salt reduction campaign, but it wants to proceed at a pace that secures the support of consumers. Heinz had put most effort so far into products where the opportunity for salt reduction was greatest and where changing the product would have the greatest impact.

**Dr Jenny Lisle** said there is a clear link between high salt intakes and a risk of higher blood pressure and heart disease for most people in the UK. It has been estimated that if the FSA target of 6g/day is met, it could lead to a 13% reduction in stroke and a 10% reduction in ischaemic heart disease in the UK (equating to approximately 20,000 fewer strokes and 11,000 fewer deaths from heart disease each year). So, we need to focus on reducing salt intakes even though salt is not the only risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

**Carole Stewart** of Northern Foods said the Neptune Project was not the only collaborative project undertaken by the food industry to reduce salt levels in processed food. Similar initiatives had been undertaken by the bread industry and the meat industry and both these preceded the FSA 2002 campaign. By making steady changes, the food industry can reduce salt levels with the

support of consumers. Carole suggested that the FSA salt reduction campaign could be improved by extending its reach because almost 50% of food is now consumed outside the home. So a quick way of achieving lower salt intake levels would be to extend the campaign to all non-domestic eating establishments, including fast-food outlets, restaurants and workplace catering.

**Anne Donelan** of Sodexo said many caterers, including Sodexo, are working with the FSA on the salt reduction campaign and publishing their commitments. Many major food contractors are already engaged and it has been encouraging recently to see newer, smaller companies joining the campaign. **Vicky Targett** of the FSA confirmed that the FSA has been extending its work on salt and working more closely with the catering sector, pub chains, coffee shops, fast-food outlets and workplace catering. The campaign now covers 1.5m meals served in workplaces. They have also been working with the Department of Children, Schools and Families to ensure the salt content of school meals is reduced.

**Baroness Howe** asked for clarification on the Ofcom restrictions. **Jack Winkler** said that the NGOs who had been campaigning for a ban on the promotion of HFSS foods before the 9pm watershed were not optimistic. **Maura Gillespie** said the NGOs were still campaigning for this objective but they recognise that they may not succeed in the near term.

**Gary Stephenson** said that Proctor & Gamble had been using nanotechnology to reduce the salt content of its products and as a company it is working to achieve the FSA targets, but more evidence is emerging which questions the significance attached to salt as a risk factor and he would like to see an independent review of the scientific basis for the focus on salt.

**Alan Long of Vega Research** said that potassium chloride could be used in food production as an alternative to salt. Vega Research has campaigned for many years for lower salt versions of common foods including bread and Marmite, but they have not been able to persuade the producers of Marmite to produce a low salt yeast extract.

**Lord Rea** asked if it would be easier for firms pursuing best practice if mandatory targets for the salt content of all processed foods were introduced, so that the most responsible food producers are not at a competitive disadvantage. **Nigel** said that if this happened, UK food producers would still be at a competitive disadvantage in comparison with imported foods that did not meet the same standards and there are some foods where it is technically difficult to reduce the salt content.

**Adam Treslove of the FSA** said that the FSA expected to report in the spring on an independent evaluation of different front of pack food labelling schemes which they had commissioned.

**The Countess of Mar** suggested that an important message that had emerged from the meeting was the need to keep the salt target in perspective. **Lord Rea** agreed that salt is only one risk factor for heart disease, but it is an important one and one that we can act on. **Paul Berryman** said that salt intake would be affected by the quantity of food people eat as well as its salt content, so messages on healthy eating need to bear that in mind.

## **Conclusion**

Lord Rea thanked the speakers for their presentations, the FSA representatives and members for their contributions and announced that the date of the next meeting would be on Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> December, when the Forum will be discussing the contribution of beekeeping to UK horticulture and of allotments to food security and a healthy lifestyle.