



# ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY FOOD & HEALTH FORUM



## FHF meeting on nutrition labelling on food

5-6.30pm, Tuesday 28 April 2009

House of Lords Committee Room 4A

### Minutes

#### Introduction

Lord Rea welcomed members and the guest speakers to the meeting on nutrition labelling on food. He emphasised that the purpose of nutrition labelling was to enable consumers to make healthy informed choices and to recognise healthy food options. Lord Rea said the speakers would be discussing the merits of the two chief nutrition labelling schemes in use in the UK : the guideline daily amounts (GDAs) scheme and the “traffic light” scheme, which had been endorsed by the FSA and adopted by certain members of the food industry. Lord Rea noted that the debate about these two schemes in the UK is taking place against a background of EU reform which seeks to consolidate and modernise legislation governing food labelling, including nutrition labelling. At EU level, it has been agreed that the consumer must have access to clear, consistent and evidence-based information, but the proposed regulation allows for the development of best practice in the presentation of nutrition information, including alternative forms of expression of the nutrition information in relation to overall daily nutrient requirements or graphical forms of presentation.

Lord Rea introduced the two guest speakers: Pauline Douglas, the Chairman of the British Dietetic Association, which supports the FSA approved “traffic light” labelling scheme; and Dr Jane Holdsworth of Sponsus Ltd, a consultant to the Food and Drink Federation and Director of the GDA Campaign.

#### Pauline Douglas, Chairman of the British Dietetic Association

Pauline said the BDA is involved in the debate on nutrition labeling as the professional organisation for some 6328 dietitians, diet support workers and students. The BDA is also the “trade union” of the profession, so it works through workplaces to promote healthy eating. They want a scheme that is in the public interest and, most importantly, something people can readily understand.

Dietitians are the only professional with qualifications in nutrition and dietetics and the only people who can diagnose, assess and treat people with nutritional problems. Their practical experience highlights the importance of having a nutrition labelling scheme that fits in with people’s lifestyles.

Many dietitians are working in the NHS, industry, private practice, with NGOs and Government and they advise on food policy across a wide spectrum. They also work with a very wide range of specialist groups to promote, maintain and improve health (see slides 7 and 8). Dietitians work with all age and ethnic groups, in a wide range of sectors, from education to sport to industry. Dietetics is all about support the consumer to make relevant healthy choices.

The BDA responded to the FSA consultation in 2006 on front of pack labelling. It fully supported the research that had been undertaken and wanted a prominent and easy to use format, with a consistent basis for sign-posting. The BDA also supported the proposals in the Government’s

Chairman: Lord Rea  
Vice-Chairmen: Dr Ian Gibson MP  
& Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer  
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2004 and 2008 White Papers, *Choosing Health* and *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives*. The BDA also felt that back of pack labelling could be used to help increase understanding on the part of some consumers.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that lots of different people are now shopping for food; some do it online, others in person. Many consumers have limited time to choose their shopping, for example young mothers with children. The BDA have also done a lot of work with people with learning difficulties. Research shows that people with limited understanding, understand pictorial labelling more easily. In other cases elderly people may be shopping for the first time, such as widowers, and such people who are not familiar with food labels need clear and easily visible labels.

The BDA is looking forward to the independent research of the Project Management Panel being published in early May. It has been looking at the GDA and the traffic light schemes and the possibility of a hybrid system. We need clearly independent, authoritative and transparent research. Of course research is only authoritative for a limited time, until responses to it and new research is published.

We need joint working, particularly during a recession when resources are limited, to achieve a clear system. It should be designed to reduce health inequalities, be easily understood. This may lead to a "lowest common denominator" approach. Some manufacturers may want to continue using their own labels, but it could be confusing for consumers if we continue to have lots of different systems.

Most consumers are clear about calories and the BDA would like information about calories to be included in whatever system is recommended by the FSA.

Portion sizes are not well understood by consumers and can vary enormously between different groups. A lot more work is needed in this area to establish a standard portion size that is well understood. The BDA is looking for consistency, for example a slice of bread from a standard 800g loaf could be regarded as a standard portion. The universities of Dundee and Stirling, and others working in obesity management, have done a lot of work in this area in recent years. The BDA hopes that partnership working will lead to agreement on standard portion sizes.

Sustainability is not a new issue, but it encompasses a huge agenda with multiple partners as illustrated by the debate on sustainable fish species.

Experience suggests that organisations must work together to agree a common message if we are to succeed in educating the public about healthy eating; different messages cause confusion.

The UK has been influencing the debate on nutrition labelling in Europe. We need a concerted approach at all levels within the European Union to ensure effort is not wasted and a clear and consistent policy is produced.

In summary, we need front of pack labelling that is clearly visible and that will help reduce health inequalities – so it must be easily understood by low income and less well educated people. The BDA would like information about calories to be included on the label and welcome joint working on portion sizes. Strong leadership and a common approach will be needed if we want to improve public health. We need clear messages that are not susceptible to manipulation by interested parties and research needs to be used more effectively to achieve this.

#### **Dr Jane Holdsworth, Managing Director Sponsus Ltd & Director of the GDA campaign**

We have been focussing on nutrition labelling on food for over three years and sometimes we focus too much on the detail of various schemes and not enough on the results. The majority of packaged food and soft drink products sold in the UK now displays clear front of pack labelling of one type or another. All schemes show the levels of the four key nutrients – sugars, fat, saturates and salt per stated portion and most show calorie levels too, even though this is not a requirement

of the traffic light scheme. Some labels also use colours to denote whether a product is high medium or low per 100g or sometimes per portion. Others use percentage of guideline daily amounts (GDA) to denote how much a portion contributes to a daily diet. There is no evidence that combining these two schemes will improve food literacy and there is some evidence that it may confuse. Millions of pounds have been invested in communicating about the schemes – at least £10 million. All schemes comply with the January 2008 EU Commission proposal on food information for customers front of pack requirements, excepting the requirement to label carbohydrates.

The UK public has clearer food content information than at any time in the past. Tremendous progress has been made towards delivering clear on pack labelling since the 2004 White paper on “Informing choice” and Britain leads the world in this area. Evidence suggests that this improved labelling is welcomed by shoppers of all socio-economic groups. The recently published Department of Health, *Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives one year on* report states: “to support people in achieving an appropriate energy balance, it is vital that they have clear, accessible information about the number of calories they are consuming. Universal calorie labelling will be important in helping people manage their overall intake and thereby achieve a healthy weight.”

We are looking forward to three further strands of work in this area on the part of the FSA and at a European level. We expect the FSA Project Management Panel (PMP) research which has been investigating which nutrition labelling schemes help inform consumers, which has been peer reviewed, to be published in early May. We welcome the FSA’s commitment that a cost benefit analysis will be undertaken and that they will hold a 3 month public consultation on the results of the PMP research. At a European level, the EFIC peer reviewed research has yet to be fully published and the first findings of the FLABEL research, which is partly funded by the EU Commission, are due to be published in early May 2009. The first reading of the EU proposal on food information in the European Parliament is now scheduled to take place in autumn 2009 – after the European elections this summer – with negotiations on the content of the legislation likely to continue into 2010. It is vital that any proposed changes to the UK status quo must be considered within a European context.

The merit of GDAs, and GDA labels, is that they are objective, science based guidelines. They were designed to help consumers make sense of complex information already on the back of food packaging. GDA labels are signposts which provide information on the nutrition content per portion. They have helped to stimulate product reformulation and inform product development and they enable people to see food in the context of the whole diet. GDAs are intended to condense complex information helpfully, but the nutritional content of food is a complex area and not readily reducible to a colour-coded scheme.

GDA labels are now displayed consistently on more than 20,000 product lines in the UK by almost 80 companies and are more prevalent than any other scheme. A majority of UK consumers are aware of them and 63%<sup>1</sup> claim to have used them to inform food and drink choice. GDA labels provide the facts about what is inside a product to help consumer make a choice. Research by a Daily Mirror Newspaper Group Panel from December 2007 to January 2008 found that they are well understood by Mirror readers, which supported the finding that consumers of all socio-economic groups are able to use them.

The GDA icon format is now being adopted by other industries, demonstrating that other industries believe it is easily understood and a recognisable way to show “what’s inside”. For example, the GDA type format was used to advertise a car in *The Sunday Times* on 12th April 2009 (slide 8).

There are three reasons why the GDA campaign do not recommend combining the traffic light and GDA labelling schemes. First, the GDA scheme is based per portion, while the traffic light scheme is per 100g and combining the two gives some ambiguous results both within and across

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<sup>1</sup> Millward Brown tracking study, April 2008

categories. Second, per 100g colour bands are wide masking big nutritional variations within categories. Third, GDA labelling is for use on all product categories, while traffic lights are recommended only for a small number of categories and are acknowledged as being unsuitable for some products.

The Millward Brown research (see slide 10) shows that shoppers do not really understand what the traffic light labelling system tells them. In this study, computer-aided, self-completion interviewing was carried out by Millward Brown in 4 “dips” (episodes between October 2006 and April 2008) which was nationally representative. It indicated that whilst consumers claim they can take information from the traffic light labels quickly (see slide 11) and they also claim that traffic light labelling is easy to understand (see slide 12) the information that they actually take from it is factually incorrect (see slide 13). For example, when asked to describe which of three “following statements applies best to what this food labelling tells you?” on a packet of food with a “red” salt label, a majority of those surveyed responded that “the product is high in salt per serving”, whereas the correct response was that “the product is high in salt per 100g.”

Jane Holdsworth showed further slides which illustrate how this can lead to confusion. Slide 14 showed the traffic light labels on a fresh cream strawberry scone and an egg custard tart, two “sweet treats”. She said that at first glance, the colour coding on these two cakes might lead the shopper to think that the custard tart is a healthier option, but the tart contains more calories and roughly the same amount of fat as the scone (it is coded amber for both, whereas the scone is red). However on balance the tart is not really a healthier option.

Slide 15 illustrated traffic light labelling on 3 spreads. Glancing at the colour codes, all these 3 spreads appear to be the same – they all had red fat and saturates signs. However, their saturate content varies from 26% of GDA to just 3% of GDA, illustrating that traffic light labelling is not very effective in helping customers make the healthiest choices within food categories. This could be vitally important for consumers with heart health issues.

Slide 17 showed the GDA labelling for two “ready meals” – lasagne and tomato and basil chicken. Both meals contain similar amounts of calories, sugars and fat, but the lasagne has a much higher content of both saturates and salt. When the GDA label with per 100g information is overlaid with traffic light labelling (slide 18) the products appear at a glance to be the same: the big difference in salt content and saturates is masked by the fact that both qualify for the same colour codes.

Slide 19 illustrates another example of two ready meals where the same colour coding masks the fact that one contains 100% of the GDA of saturates, whereas the other contains 35%.

The mostly green “eat more” advice does not work across all categories. Slide 21 illustrates the traffic light labelling for wine gums and hot cross buns, which is mainly green. The GDA values show the nutritional and energy data in the context of the whole diet. Overlaying this with colour codes based on per 100g amounts may give some shoppers the impression that they can eat as much of these largely “green” labelled foods as they like. Similarly oven baked potato chips - a relatively healthier option, in comparison with fried chips - have 4 green lights for sugar, fat, saturates and salt. However they do contain 224 calories per 165g portion (calories are not included on the FSA traffic light label), so whilst they are fine as part of a balanced diet, one could not eat limitless quantities without having a negative impact on the waistline. At the same time, predominantly red traffic light labels on many nutritionally important products such as cheese, nuts and herring, seems to indicate that they are not a wise choice.

In summary, the adoption of front of pack labelling in the UK is a success story and any further proposed changes to the status quo should take account of developments at an EU. Combining the traffic light and GDA schemes can result in confusing results and we need to recognise that universal calorie labelling is emerging as one of the most important elements in helping consumers achieve a healthy weight.

## Questions

**Lord Dykes** asked the speakers to comment about the salt content of food and what action is being taken by manufacturers and suppliers to reduce it. **Pauline Douglas** referred this question to **Anne Donelan** of Sodexo, who said that many manufactures and food suppliers are working hard, but the FSA RSC Composition of Food Tables (McCance and Widdowson) are unable to keep up with the progress that is being achieved, which makes it difficult for Registered Dietitians to give patients, catering and public health colleagues up to date advice. There has been significant progress overall in terms of processed and prepared foods, but there are anomalies. For example, whereas the salt content of a standard, sliced loaf of bread has been reduced, the salt content of artisan bread has generally remained stable. The objective is to reduce average salt consumption to 6g a day in the first instance from the baseline of 9.5g, measured in 2006. **Adam Treslove** of the FSA said the current average is 8.6g a day, so progress is being made. **Lord Dyke** welcomed this information and stressed the importance of reducing the salt content of food in the workplace. **Lord Rea** said that the salt content of food highlights the importance of clear nutritional labelling so that people understand how much salt is in their food.

**Dr Jenny Lisle** of the Royal College of Physicians Faculty of Public Health asked how **Jane** would address the fact that health organisations in the UK without exception recommend the traffic light scheme rather than the GDA scheme as the best for improving the health of the population and addressing health inequalities. **Jane** said that it's important to remember why GDA labels were introduced – they were designed to help consumers be more informed about what is in ALL types of food and drink (not just those that are recommended for traffic light labelling) and the Daily Mirror research showed that the GDA scheme was understood by C1, C2 and D/E groups and was helping to inform them. **Jenny** said that research carried out by other organisations such as Which? and the National Heart Forum had found that the traffic light labelling scheme was most easily and quickly understood by consumers. **Jane** said she had not seen the research data on which the health organisations had based their views.

**Cathy Court** of Netmums, said that they had also undertaken research in 2007. Of the 17,000 members who responded to their survey, 79% preferred the traffic light labelling scheme because it enabled them to assess food “at a glance”. She emphasised that it is difficult for mothers to do the shopping with young children, so we need a system that can be used quickly if it is going to be used by parents.

**Lord Rea** said that per portion labelling does not allow consumers to compare like with like, whereas a system based per 100g, such as the traffic light scheme, does. **Jane** agreed that was correct, but said people eat food and that is consumed per portion. **Pauline Douglas** agreed that it would be helpful if we could establish standard portion sizes and use traffic lights in that context so consumers have a practical, quick to use system.

**Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen** said the simplicity of the traffic light scheme is attractive. Both schemes have useful features, but you can only absorb so much information in a short time. **Jane** said that research shows that consumers do not look at all the information on food packs. Typically some consumers are interested in calorie content and look at that, others at fat or salt depending on their particular health concerns. She agreed it was important for consumers to be able to find the information they want quickly. **Pauline** agreed that people have to be able to see the information at a glance, but consumers are increasingly looking for additional information because of the increasing incidence of health problems such as obesity and diabetes. Consumers also want different amounts of information at different times.

**Colin Walker** of Which? said their research had clearly indicated that the traffic light labelling scheme is the best at helping consumers make choices about healthy food. After three years of debate about rival schemes, we need to remind ourselves why nutrition labelling is important: we want consumers to be informed about the nutritional content of their food and then let them make choices. Most retailers are now using front of pack labelling, which is excellent, so we should be able to agree that it would be best to have one scheme and that choice should be based on evidence, including research on how people actually use the schemes in practice. If the FSA

recommends one scheme on the basis of its research, Which? will support that scheme and it is calling on the food industry to do the same.

**Nigel Dickie** of Heinz UK & Ireland asked the speakers to comment on what reaction they expect to the FSA's work and whether they anticipate changes will be made in one or other of the labelling scheme. **Pauline** said the BDA welcomes the FSA commissioned research and hopes it will be transparent. If they are assured it has taken on board all the research currently available and the views of all stakeholders have been taken into account, then they will support the FSA's recommendations. She does not expect significant change "over night", but if the research is robust, the BDA's view is that all stakeholders should support it and drive through whatever changes it requires in the interests of public health.

**Lord Rea** asked if the EU will be influenced by the FSA commissioned research. **Pauline** said that if the UK are to influence the EU positively, UK stakeholders need to reach an agreed view. **Jane** agreed with **Pauline** and said that the EU would take account both of the UK research and other research being conducted elsewhere in Europe. We also need to be mindful of the huge amount of investment that will be necessary to implement changes, so we need to consider that in the context of possible changes at an EU level. Moreover the UK is only one country in the EU and there are vastly different views on nutrition labelling across the EU.

**Sally Moore** of Morrisons Supermarkets said she had been very interested to hear the arguments made by the speakers and it was helpful to understand that whilst the traffic light scheme offers clarity, it may not do justice to all the complexities involved in nutrition labelling. She suggested it was unfair to expect nutrition labelling to solve all our dietary problems and wondered whether there should be more emphasis on healthy foods as part of a balanced diet combined with exercise.

**The Countess of Mar** said that as someone who prepares fresh food for meals, she wondered whether modern consumers are so focussed on the content of their food that they forget to enjoy their meals. **Pauline** agreed that cultural changes had reduced the amount of cooking being done in homes, but said the increasing incidence of health problems required a greater focus on nutrition for the sake of our health.

**Tracy Forward** of Efamol asked whether labels should be used more effectively to steer consumers towards healthy food options, such as fresh fruit and vegetables, rather than simply to make choices within food categories, such as creamy cakes and puddings. She suggested labelling should be put on food aisles in supermarkets as well as products.

**Lord Rea** said that the consumption patterns of the population have changed – because of developments in the food industry and other social changes – with more people eating more processed food, so nutrition labelling is necessary and valuable. Whichever scheme is adopted, nutrition labelling will enable customers to buy healthier food. Retailers are also working to promote healthy eating messages and that context is helpful when customers look at nutrition labelling. **The Countess of Mar** agreed and said it would be very interesting to see what effect nutrition labelling has on the food choices made by the next generation of consumers who grow up using them, having been exposed to healthy eating messages.

**Jenny Lisle** said there is a real crisis in terms of the obesity epidemic, which is associated with increased risk of Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers, so it is important that we address the issue of nutrition labelling on food urgently.

## **Conclusion**

Lord Rea thanked the guest speakers and announced the date of the next Forum meeting: a half-day spring conference on food fortification during the afternoon of 19 May.

