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Review welcome - food labelling must use traffic lights

“Protecting and promoting the health of communities is the critical issue in food labelling,” says Michael Moore, CEO of the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA). “This is why front of pack multiple traffic light labelling (MTL) of food is a fundamental preventive health measure.”

“Ordinary mums and dads ought not to be forced to plough through complex labelling when trying to make healthy decisions for their children. A traffic light for salt, another for fat and one for sugar would send a simple clear message to a consumer about factors that are the prime causes of chronic disease. The only disappointment with the recommendations is that the MTL is not to be mandatory across all foods in the first instance.”

Mr Moore’s comments are in line with recommendations outlined in the report *Labelling Logic*, the Final Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy which was released today by the Chair, Dr Neil Blewett AO. The PHAA welcomes the structure which places Food Safety and Preventive Health as the top two priorities in food labelling.

The PHAA is delighted with the first recommendation of the Review because of the long term impacts that it will have across consideration of food issues: “that the Food Standards Australia New Zealand Act 1991 be amended to include a definition of public health to the effect that: ‘Public Health is the organised response by society to protect and promote health, and to prevent illness, injury and disability’”.

“We have the opportunity to take one of the prime moves to tackle issues like obesity and hypertension – fundamental causes of illness such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer. It is now time for the government to implement these findings,” said Mr Moore.

Appropriate traffic light labelling is one important step in dealing with the growing epidemic of food-related illness. According to the government’s response to the Preventative Health Taskforce in 2010 chronic disease such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancers:

- are responsible for around 80 per cent of the burden of disease and injury in Australia;
- account for around 70 per cent of total health care expenditure;
- are part of 50 per cent of GP consultations;
- are the leading causes of disability and death in Australia; and
- are associated with around 537,000 person-years loss of participation in full time employment and around 47,000 person years in part time employment each year.

“Of course there are other things that will also have an impact such as appropriate physical exercise and eating fresh whole foods, especially fruit and vegetables. The powerful food manufacturing industry loves to argue that fitness rather than traffic light labelling is the solution. Of course there is no single solution, we need to develop a range of responses to addressing food-related illness and disease and traffic light labelling would be a step in the right direction,” argued Mr Moore.

“We now have the recommendation and there is no excuse for inaction on traffic light labelling”.

For further information/comment:

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