

Nutrition information

Global and regional developments on nutrition labelling were discussed in a recent seminar and workshop.

NUTRITION labelling is a declaration of the amount of energy and nutrients in a food product on its label. This is to enable the consumer to know the type of nutrients contained in the product, as well as allowing him to compare the nutritional value of different brands of a similar product.

In this way, the consumer is able to make an informed choice before purchasing a particular pre-packaged food. Furthermore, nutrition labels are intended to raise the consumer's awareness about nutrition when purchasing food and preparing meals.

There have been numerous international and regional regulatory developments in the area of nutrition labelling and health claims.

The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI), South-East Asia region, organised a seminar and workshop in Kuala Lumpur last month to provide updates on these developments.

The meeting – the sixth in the series to be organised by ILSI since 2001 – was attended by officers from regulatory agencies in South-East Asian countries, as well as scientists from Australia, United Kingdom, Europe and the United States.

I would like to share with you some of the highlights from this meeting, and some thoughts on the way ahead.

The focus shall be on front-of-pack labelling, one of the most recent and controversial developments in nutrition labelling.

Latest updates

Nutrition labelling guidelines were first published by the Codex Alimentarius Commission 25 years ago, whereas the guidelines on nutrition and health claims by the commission were published in 1997.

Both documents have undergone several revisions and amendments over the years.

Items currently being discussed in the Codex Committee on Food Labelling (CCFL) and the Codex Committee on Nutrition and Foods for Special Dietary Uses (CCNFSDU) were highlighted in some detail.

These include continued discussions on the Nutrient Reference Values (NRVs) for vitamins and minerals. One of the new initiatives is on NRVs for nutrients associated with non-communicable diseases.

The CCFL also expanded the list of nutrients that are always declared to include saturated fat, sodium (salt) and total sugars.

In most countries, only energy, protein, carbohydrate and fat are required to be declared on the nutrition label. These are given as per 100g (or per 100ml), or per serving of the food.

A document that can serve as a tool for governments considering the implementation of mandatory nutrition labelling also became available.

Principles and criteria to enhance the legibility of nutrition labelling are now included in the Codex



Guide on Nutrition Labelling.

The other area discussed in the CCFL was the ingredients identified in the Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, namely, fruits, vegetables and legumes, whole grains and nuts, free or added sugars, and salt (sodium).

The committee plans to initiate new work on the conditions for nutrient content claims in relation to these ingredients, as well as trans-fatty acids.

Officers from regulatory authorities in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam also provided updates on the status of nutrition labelling and claims in their respective countries.

In all of these countries, except for Malaysia, nutrition labelling is mandatory only under specific conditions, for example, for specific dietary foods, enriched or fortified foods, or when the products make a nutrition or health claim.

In Malaysia, a wide variety of pre-packaged foods are required to have nutrition labelling, and the declaration must be in per 100g (or per 100ml), and per serving.

In Thailand, the declaration must be in per reference serving size. It is the only country in the region with preset weights for seven categories of foods, covering 68 food items.

Each country may express nutrient content according to different national reference values (eg NRV, Recommended Dietary Allowance, Recommended Daily Intake, Recommended Energy and Nutrient Intake).

Friendlier labelling formats

Nutrient declaration on food labels (nutrition information panels) are intended to provide consumers with information on the nutritional content of the food product, thereby assisting him in making food choices.

However, various studies have reported that consumers do not actually use the nutrition information on the back of packs when making food choices.

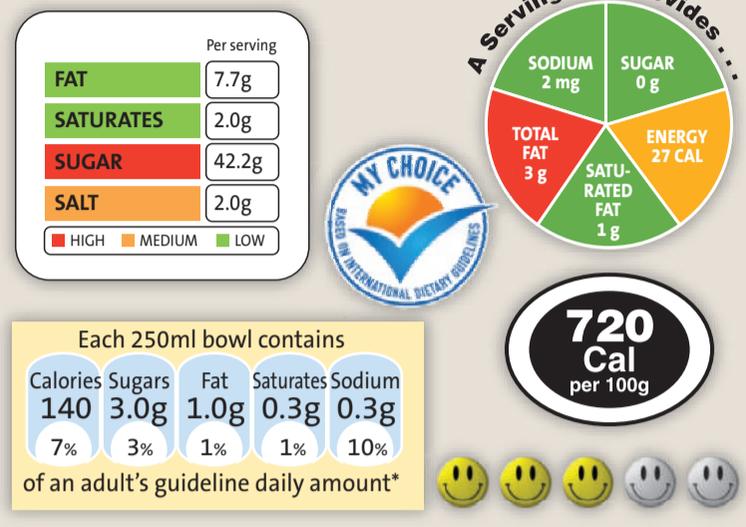
The reasons reported included lack of time, concerns about accuracy of the information, difficulty in understanding the information, and not knowing how to translate such information into actual food choices.

Various organizations and authorities have therefore suggested adding essential information at the front of the pack in a "friendlier" format.

A multitude of such front-of-pack (FOP) nutrition labelling formats has been proposed, ranging from simple symbols to more complex schemes.

These formats include simplified logos or symbols such as ticks and smiley faces, Pick the Tick, Green Keyhole, energy label, single or

Examples of FOP nutrition labels



multiple traffic light systems, and colour-coded Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA).

Except for Singapore and Brunei, FOP labelling is not established in Asean countries.

A Healthier Choice Symbol (HCS) programme administered by the Singaporean Health Promotion Board has been implemented in the country since 1998.

The HCS on packaged food products indicate that they are the healthier options within the same category of food products.

Items carrying the HCS are generally lower in total fat, saturated fat, sodium and sugar. Some are also higher in dietary fibre and calcium, compared to other similar products.

A variant of the HCS for snack foods, known as the Healthier Snack Symbol, was also recently introduced. This category includes plain biscuits and cookies, crisps, ice-cream and plain cakes.

In Brunei, a Healthier Choice Logo programme was initiated in 2004 by the Health Ministry. Presently, only cooking oils are covered by this programme.

A similarly named system was proposed by Malaysia's Health Ministry in 2007.

The aim was to help consumers identify food products that are "healthier" choices from the same category of food. It was to be a voluntary programme, supervised by the ministry's Food Safety and Quality Division.

Five categories of food products were identified for the programme, namely, cereal-based foods, canned foods, fats and oils, soft drinks and beverages, and dairy products.

The food industry and the ministry had several discussions to determine the criteria or nutrient profile required to qualify for the logo.

As I recall, there was considerable difficulty in obtaining agreement among industry members on the required criteria and the food categories to be included.

The programme was to have been implemented in 2008, but has been put on hold as the ministry is considering other "more comprehensive" systems.

In the meantime, Tesco Malaysia has started an FOP nutrition labelling scheme, based on the Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA), for its one line of prepackaged foods.

This is suppose to provide an "at a glance" nutrient profile, com-

pared to a full nutrition information panel. Selected nutrients are highlighted – energy, sugar, fat, saturates and salt.

The scheme, however, is not endorsed by the Health Ministry.

In Thailand, a proposal by NGOs (non-governmental agencies) to use the "traffic light" system is still being studied by their Food and Drug Administration (FDA), along with other FOP labelling formats.

Currently, there are voluntary schemes by a few retail food chains, using the GDA.

In the Philippines, there are also attempts by multinational companies to use the GDA scheme. The Philippines FDA is studying such proposals to determine if they are indeed beneficial to consumers.

In the meantime, the Philippines Department of Health, in coordination with the Nutritionist-Dietitians Association of the Philippines, is currently developing a "Good for You Seal". It is intended to cover both processed foods and meals served in fast food chains.

The way forward

It can be summarized from reports of food regulators in the region that the authorities in several countries are moving cautiously ahead with regards to the use of FOP labelling.

It should be noted that the CCFL has not agreed to discuss FOP schemes for nutrition labelling, although it has been proposed.

For Malaysia, the authorities should seriously discuss this matter with all relevant stakeholders.

Firstly, there should be greater efforts in promoting understanding of nutrition information panels (NIPs).

We should have better information on which parts of the NIP the consumer pays attention to, and which parts he has difficulty understanding. We ought to find out how the consumer uses the information available in a NIP.

All stakeholders can contribute towards these efforts – regulatory authorities, the food industry, professional bodies and NGOs.

In the meantime, the authorities should proceed to consider improving NIPs. This could be along the lines discussed in the CCFL sessions, for example, the legibility and comprehension of nutrient levels. There could also be other ways to improve the usage of NIPs.

As for FOP labels, authorities need to seriously discuss this.

I am concerned with the possibility of the proliferation of different FOP schemes on food labels. One retail store has started a GDA labelling scheme. Other manufacturers could start other FOP formats.

This would be potentially confusing to consumers.

I would urge the food industry to work with the authorities in this respect. I would also urge NGOs like consumer associations, to discuss the matter with the authorities, and fully understand the merits and disadvantages of all possible approaches.

It is clear that there are challenges in arriving at a format that will be acceptable to most stakeholders.

Let me share some of these concerns.

Experiences elsewhere have shown that choosing an effective format is complex and involves many factors, including the level of nutrition knowledge of consumers.

An oversimplified system could lead to misunderstanding among consumers on the role of that particular food in their daily diet.

The choice of a system also depends on the actual intention of such a simplified format.

Is the purpose to provide a simplified NIP, or to categorise foods as "healthy" or "healthier" according to a specified nutrient profile?

If the intention is to encourage the food industry to produce healthier versions of products, is it possible to resort to various other means?

Is it desirable to make judgments for the consumer, for example, to buy the "green" and less of the "red" in a traffic light system?

It is clearly a challenge in the categorisation of foods, particularly with regard to the basis of the nutrient profile to be applied.

What are the nutrients to be used as the basis for nutrient profiling? Or even to decide what are the nutrients to highlight in the front panel?

Is the FOP scheme across all foods, or for comparison within each category of food?

For consumers in this country, where prepackaged foods do not feature so prominently in their diet, is too much emphasis being placed on NIPs?

Perhaps we also need to look into "labelling" and advice on ready-to-eat meals, for example, the various hawker foods and franchised fast foods.

■ *NutriScene is a fortnightly column by Dr Tee E Siong, who pens his thoughts as a nutritionist with over 30 years of experience in the research and public health arena. For further information, e-mail starhealth@thestar.com.my. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.*