NUTRITION LABELLING OF SNACK FOODS

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1. Introduction

The primary objective of nutrition labelling is to describe the nutritional qualities of a food product factually and informatively. It is aimed at providing a means for conveying information of the nutrient content on the label, thereby assisting the consumer in the wise choice of food (FAO/WHO, 1988). Although nutrition education is not the primary aim of nutrition labelling, it does provide support to nutrition education activities as it encourages the use of sound nutrition principles in the formulation of foods, which would be of benefit to public health. Nutrition information on food products is able to facilitate the population to respond effectively to the various nutrition education activities that are being carried out (WHO, 1990).

Nutrition laebliing is equally important to the food industry as labelling provides a means for food manufacturers and retailers to become more aware of the nutritional properties of their products and be encouraged to emphasise these properties to consumers. Food manufacturers have a responsibility to provide accurate, relevant information on the nutritional value of their products to the consumers.

2. Nutrition labelling in Malaysia

There is currently no mandatory nutrition labelling of foods in Malaysia, except for regulations pertaining to the labelling of "special purpose foods". Regulations 388 to 393 of the Malaysian Food Regulations 1985 (Ministry of Health, 1985) provides for obligatory nutrition labelling of foods such as infant formulae and cereal-based foods for infants and young children. These foods are to be labelled with the energy, protein, carbohydrate, fat, vitamin and mineral contents. In addition, as provided for under Regulation 26, foods enriched or fortified with permitted vitamins, minerals, essential amino acids or essential fatty acids shall be labelled with the type and quantity of the nutrient.

In a rapidly developing country like Malaysia, the need for food preservation, packaging, and processing is likely to continue to increase. The food industries in the country is indeed developing at a rapid pace. Malaysian consumers are becoming more aware of their dietary intake, not only in terms of food additives but also the nutrients contained therein. There is increased awareness of the importance of nutrition to health and fitness. There is therefore a need to consider the implementation of nutrition labelling for general foods in the country.

The proposed nutrition labelling scheme would necessarily have to take into consideration the stage of development, culture and technical resources available, and should not impose great costs on the manufacturers. There would necessarily have to be a great deal of planning and discussion for a feasible scheme for the country. In addition, considerations have to be given to various aspects related to the analysis of these nutrients to be declared on the label (Tee, 1992).

3. Consumption and nutritional value of snack foods

Snacking by children has been and will probably remain a part of the dietary pattern. Snacking between meals may contribute to some intake of nutrients to the children. This, however, depends on the types of snacks consumed by the children. The consumption and nutritional value of snack foods has been of concern to health authorities. The subject has been discussed by several quarters. Tee (1979) had pointed out that some of the popular snack foods sold in school canteens may be of low nutritional value and drew attention to the importance of discouraging the sale of such foods in schools. Zanariah (1986) discussed the nutritional value of snack foods and the role of such foods in the daily diet of consumers. Zanariah et al. (1989) carried out a study of the food habits of primary school children and examined the types of foods sold in the school canteens. The investigators recommended that school canteens should provide suitable quantity of nutritious and wholesome foods for the pupils.

In addition, consumer bodies in the country have, from time to time, called for the sale of nutritious and wholesome foods in school canteens.

Responding to the concern and recommendations expressed by various quarters, the relevant authorities had taken positive measures to improve the situation. Realising the importance of school canteens in providing food to school children, and to ensure that the foods sold are safe and of certain quality, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health have developed the "school canteen guideline" (Sahari, 1993). The guideline aims to assist school administrators and school canteen operators in the management of school canteens and food handling.

4. Nutrition labelling of snack foods

In view of the importance of processed snack foods in the food habits of communities, particularly children, efforts should be made to improve the nutritional value and wholesomeness of these foods. Manufacturers should recognise snack foods as a possible vehicle for nutrient intake for children and upgrade their products. At the same time, food processors could introduce nutrition labelling of snack foods to inform consumers of the nutritional value of these foods.

In an effort to improve the nutritional value and wholesomeness of snack foods, the Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM) has started the development of Malaysian standards for these foods. Two standards have been developed, namely for cereal-based snack foods and potato chips (MS 1191:1991 and MS 1261:1992). These standards prescribe the requirements for these foods including levels of various important constituents such as minimum levels of protein and iron, and maximum levels of fat and sodium chloride. Nutrition labelling is also a requirement for these products, and the list should include protein, fat, carbohydrate, energy and salt content. These requirements clearly reflect nutritional considerations for the quality of these foods.

A small survey of the label of various snack foods in the market was carried out. The label of 24 types of packaged snacks were examined, including potato chips, peas snack, prawn crackers, cereal-based extruded snacks, produced by 11 manufacturers. Only 7 foods were found to have nutrition labelling, and were produced by 3 companies. In all cases except two, the nutrients labelled were protein, carbohydrates, fat and energy. In addition to these nutrients, one of the snacks indicated the cholesterol, sodium and potassium content on the label, while the other stated the fibre, ash and salt content.

Several other aspects of the label are also worthy of comment. The most important aspect refers to the "product definition" of the snack foods. Some of the products were not appropriately named, so that it was not clear what product it was. There could be grouping

of snack foods, e.g. cereal-based, tuber-based, and vegetable-based extruded snack foods, etc. Health authorities could formulate such groupings after consultation with the food industry and a thorough survey of the market.

Three products, all from one manufacturer, claimed "lightly salted" on the wrapper, but neither sodium nor salt content of the products was declared on the wrapper. Half of the snack foods had expiry date declaration on the label. All the products examined had nett weight, ingredients and name and address of manufacturer on the wrapper.

Several of these snack foods examined had other wordings on the wrapper that were undesirable as they could be misleading. Examples of such wordings are: "Health Food: Rich in Protein" and "Stay Healthy the Fun Way".

5. Concluding remarks

Snack foods are widely consumed by some segments of the population, particularly children. Efforts should therefore be made to improve the nutritional value and wholesomeness of these foods. Food processors should also introduce nutritional labelling of snack foods to inform consumers of the nutritional value of these foods. There should be a classification for appropriate product definition to clearly inform the consumer the product he is purchasing. Health claims on the label of snack foods should also be scrutinised to prevent misinformation to the consumers.

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