NUTRITION LABELING IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT. *Nutrition labeling provides a means for conveying information of the nutrient content on the label of a food product, thereby assisting the consumer in the choice of food. Nutrition labeling is also important to the food industry as it provides a means for manufacturers and retailers to be more aware of the nutritional properties of their products. There is currently no mandatory nutrition labeling of foods in Malaysia, except for regulations pertaining to the labeling of "special purpose foods". Regulations 388 to 393 of the Malaysian Food Regulations 1985 provide for obligatory nutrition labeling of foods such as infant formulae and cereal-based foods for infants and young children. In addition, 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 are 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 labeling for more types of foods in the country.*

INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of nutrition labeling 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 labeling, 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 enables the population to respond effectively

to the various nutrition education activities that are being carried out (WHO, 1990).

Nutrition labeling is equally important to the food industry as it 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 consumers with accurate, relevant information on the nutritional value of their products.

Nutrition Labeling in Malaysia

There is currently no mandatory nutrition labeling of foods in Malaysia, except for regulations pertaining to the labeling of "special purpose foods". Regulations 388 to 393 of the Malaysian Food Regulations 1985 (Ministry of Health, 1985) provides for obligatory nutrition labeling of foods such as infant formulae and cereal-based foods for infants and young children. These foods are to be labeled 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 labeled 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 are 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 labeling for general foods in the country.

The proposed 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. The significance of selected nutrients to nutritional well-being has been

highlighted by Tee (1994) and the methods used in this laboratory for the analysis of these nutrients discussed.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There is increasing interest in nutrition labeling of foods among health authorities and several professional organisations. Discussions have been held to consider the implementation of nutrition labeling for a wider range of foods. No concrete plans have, however, been established.

In the development of nutrition labeling in the country, it is important to consider the development of capabilities in nutrient analysis. Depending on the extent of the labeling scheme, the type of nutrients to be analysed can be extensive and complicated. A wide range of analytical methods will have to be employed. Expertise is available in the country for the analysis of the major nutrients of nutritional significance. However, there are presently a few laboratories experienced in the analysis of the full range of nutrients. Technical expertise will therefore have to be developed through proper training programmes for analysts.

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