

No 166
August 2010

Salt Skip News

Published in the public interest on the web at www.saltmatters.org

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Europe has lost traffic light labels

By guest author Dr Trevor C Beard, Menzies Research Institute, Hobart

On 16 June 2010 the BBC broadcast news that the European Parliament had rejected traffic light colour coding of Front-of-Pack food labels. Instead of traffic lights Europe adopted the food industry's substitute food label showing percentages without any colour coding to make their meaning obvious.

Europe lost the red lights that would have identified the foods most directly responsible for the mass epidemics of preventable diseases—obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease, stroke and kidney failure—gaining instead a food label that won't help 20% of the population (who don't understand percentages), and discriminating against the most disadvantaged—the people who are in most need of help.

The industry knows what works

The multinational food industry starts from the weaker position, yet it wins nearly all of its battles with health. It simply knows what works and does it at the right time.

It may seem bizarre for commercial self-interest to keep winning its battles with health.

Shareholders do expect industries to maximise their profits, but politicians trying to improve the health of millions of people—and fully expecting substantial savings in the national health budget—might be expected to put health first.

The European food industry knew better. While its self-interest was obvious the industry remained silent. Even the media got no wind of it—despite their insatiable demand for controversy.

They heard nothing of a head-on confrontation between hapless consumers and a multibillion-dollar industry promoting its own substitute food label to replace the “demonising” traffic lights.

The media got their story—at the right moment—when the European Parliament was voting on food labels. Suddenly masses of European food companies lobbied politicians with the biggest flood of

representatives they had ever seen, all complaining that colour coding would “demonise” their products.

European politicians told the BBC afterwards that “armies” of lobbyists had besieged them on a scale they had never seen before in their lives. A single Italian chocolate factory lobbied one politician five times.

Every shred of evidence collected for “evidence-based” food labels became completely irrelevant in two days. European politicians voted for the food industry's own label—expecting it to be far less effective, but yielding to overwhelming coercion.

What can Australia expect? If red traffic light labels are on the agenda, the group dealing with food labelling—the Council of Australian Government Ministers (COAG)—can obviously look forward to similar treatment. Will COAG yield to coercion and put big business before health?

The red light is the whole issue. Amber and green traffic lights benefit both the industry and health, but the red lights are bitterly controversial and divisive.

Could Europe have kept traffic lights?

The short answer with hindsight is that Europe didn't give its food industry a fair go. Traffic light labels suddenly confronted the industry with a "double whammy":

1. Corn flakes for example, invented by Dr W H Kellogg and advertised for more than a century as "healthy", would suddenly receive a red light for salt;
2. There was a proposal to exclude foods with red lights from TV advertising to children at prime time (when breakfast cereals were usually advertised).

In the breathing space while traffic lights were still voluntary, Kellogg (UK) invented a new label using percentages—without guiding the consumer with explanatory colour coding—and it has become the industry standard in both Europe and Australia.

Food companies need more time

- Reformulating a popular food like a best-selling breakfast cereal is very time-consuming, expensive and risky.
- Abrupt confrontation with red traffic lights was like expecting the Titanic to stop.
- To prevent all the preventable diseases, food consumers and producers may have to march together one step at a time for half a century or more.
- If mandatory red lights work, the economic repercussions might sour our relationship with the food industry for decades.

Would COAG yield to coercion?

- The food industry lobby could complain to COAG that a red light for salt on a packet of Kellogg Corn Flakes (advertised for over a century as "healthy") would threaten its present high position in Australia's Top Ten Best-selling Breakfast Cereals.
- Shoppers driving to a supermarket STOP at red traffic lights—what is a red traffic light on a food label if it is not a health warning?
- Every shelf of every supermarket would become a forest of red lights—what else can red lights do except gradually reduce the turnover of *literally thousands of Australian products*?
- Australia is vulnerable. Cadbury no longer makes its cocoa in Hobart—it is cheaper to use the Cadbury factory in Singapore.
- Declining sales dictate price reductions and the next factory to move off-shore might be Kellogg's cereals, and their cereals factory in Manchester is the biggest in Europe.

- Red lights might drive over a thousand other food companies off-shore like Kellogg—can COAG live with that?
- The lobby would claim that the food industry's strip of percentages is very good—after spending millions of dollars on it in Europe and Australia.
- In government submissions the industry claims the strip of percentages is more *informative* than "simplistic" traffic lights, and they might ask COAG to believe this is why Europe adopted them.
- COAG could be excused for finding some of these arguments persuasive.
- Politics is a numbers game in which an army of powerful friends is better than an army of powerful enemies.

Although briefed that traffic lights were better, COAG might decide—for political reasons—that they were a luxury we could not afford.

COAG has four alternatives

1. Mandatory traffic light labels—likely to be very effective—but anathema to the food industry for that reason.
2. Mandatory green and amber lights, along with *voluntary* red lights;
3. Single "Ticks" like the one used by the Heart Foundation could replace the amber lights and "Double ticks" could replace the green lights.
4. The least effective would be the food industry's strip of percentages without any colour coding.

COAG's choice—the four alternatives

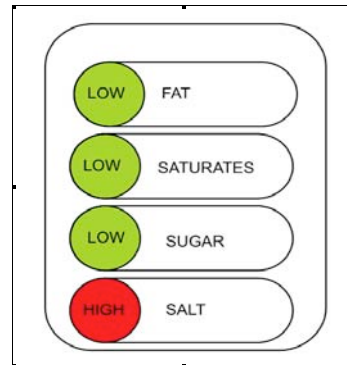
A practical example—a fair go would give Kellogg the extra time it needs

If any food company deserves a fair go it is Kellogg (Australia). The sodium content of Kellogg Corn Flakes in 1997 was still 1100 mg/100g—slightly saltier than seawater. In 1998 with the sole aim of selling healthier food Kellogg (Australia) started reducing salt in a dozen of its breakfast cereals. Corn Flakes (apparently difficult) took a decade to reach 720 mg/100g (the present level). Eventually an amber light may be possible, as with two home brand corn flakes in the UK (Sainsbury and Waitrose) with 290 mg/100g. The Australian brand Freedom Foods corn flakes (sodium 77 mg/100g) would already get a green light.

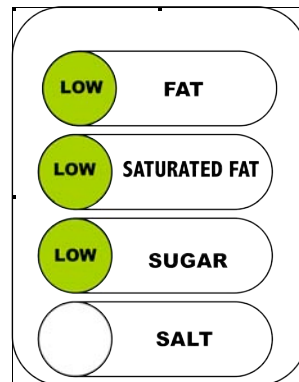
The Nutrition Information Panel

Below is the Nutrition Information Panel (NIP) on a packet of Kellogg Corn Flakes in July 2009. The sodium content of low salt foods must not exceed 120 mg/100g, and Corn Flakes still have sodium at 720 mg/100g.

Nutrition Information (AVERAGE)				
servings per package - 10				
average serving size - 30g (1 metric cup†)				
	quantity per serving	% daily intake per serving	per serve with 1/2 cup skim milk	quantity per 100g
ENERGY	470 kJ	5%	670 kJ	1580 kJ
PROTEIN	2.3 g	5%	7.0 g	7.8 g
FAT, TOTAL	<0.1 g	0.1%	0.2 g	0.2 g
- SATURATED	<0.1 g	0.1%	0.1 g	<0.1 g
CARBOHYDRATE	25.1 g	8%	31.6 g	83.6 g
- SUGARS	2.4 g	3%	8.8 g	7.9 g
DIETARY FIBRE	0.8 g	3%	0.8 g	2.6 g
SODIUM	216 mg	9%	273 mg	720 mg
POTASSIUM	28 mg	-	234 mg	93 mg



1



2

The four small Front-of-Pack labels

1. A red traffic light for salt on the front of the pack would give all shoppers a very simple and basic guide (No. 1).
2. With voluntary traffic lights the colour for salt would be white, grey or black.
3. With ticks (single for amber and double for green) there would be no tick for salt—and never any proposal to use a cross.
4. We would be naïve if we expected the food industry to vote unanimously world-wide for a label that might upset business as usual. 20% of shoppers don't even understand percentages, and very few of the remaining 80% would see sodium at "9% of one 30g serve" as a warning that salt was too high.



3

4

PER 30g SERVE				*MODERATE YOUR INTAKE			
ENERGY	PROTEIN	FAT*	SAT FAT*	CARBS	SUGARS*	SODIUM*	FIBRE
470 kJ	2.3 g	<0.1 g	<0.1 g	25.1 g	2.4 g	216 mg	0.8 g
DI* 5%	DI* 5%	DI* 0.1%	DI* 0.1%	DI* 8%	DI* 3%	DI* 9%	DI* 3%

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Salt Skip News will continue to be distributed in hard copy in The BP Monitor (QHA newsletter)

Buy a double-tick restaurant meal

There are 3 easy steps:

1. Buy a 500g tub of Coles Natural Set Yoghurt (total fat 3% and sodium 63 mg/100g).
2. Find a good Italian restaurant that makes its own stock without salt, steams its vegetables without salt and has veal marsala on the menu (or available).
3. Ask for veal marsala made with this yoghurt instead of cream and without any added salt, fat or cheese (for example no butter or cheese on any vegetable) and with stock (if any) unsalted.



In traffic lights this dish would get four green traffic lights and in Double Tick food labels (page 3) it would get four double ticks.

Veal is on the menu at all Italian restaurants and is often cooked with cream and wine. Marsala (from Sicily) is the wine with the most flavour.

If you have ever tasted Veal Marsala cooked with cream the stronger flavour with this yoghurt will amaze you. Friends who eat so-called “normal” meals—meals that cause preventable health problems—will be equally amazed if they join you out of interest and order the “normal” veal marsala for comparison. A greasy blanket of cream reduces the marsala flavour by at least 50%.

By the way when you book the table, see if the restaurant ever cooks with yoghurt—you may be lucky.

Drysdale Cuisine—green light (double tick) meals—in Canberra

- Read all about the Drysdale experiment by clicking [Newsletters](#) in www.saltmatters.org and looking at Salt Skip news No 164 (April 2010).
- Drysdale House in Hobart had a total attendance of 46 on 15 July.
- The students under the supervision of our usual chef Giulio Cefano gave us excellent food again, and there seems to be a good prospect of getting restaurants to add this cuisine to their menus.
- Dr Tom Gavranic—a semi-retired GP from Queanbeyan (NSW)—came to see at first hand what Drysdale House is doing, with a view to giving Canberra a similar service with green light (double tick) meals at the Canberra Institute of Technology, ably assisted by Wendy Gray, APD.

BP Monitor with Salt Skip News is published every 2 months, from February to December (6 issues a year).

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