

Labels: an unhealthy trend

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Changes to food labelling rules mean more misleading claims by manufacturers, writes Gyorgy Scrinis.

Controversial draft regulations proposed by the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Authority to govern health claims on food labels and advertisements are likely to lead to a whole new range of exaggerated and essentially misleading claims about many foods and beverages.

Permitting health claims means that food companies will be able to claim that a particular food has a specific beneficial health effect, such as reducing the risk of serious diseases, improving some bodily function, or contributing to weight maintenance or weight loss.

Nutrient-content claims on food labels - such as "97 per cent fat-free" and "high in calcium" - have been permitted and used extensively by processed food manufacturers for many years. The fast-food industry has also finally discovered the benefits of nutritional marketing strategies, with McDonald's introducing nutrient-content claims on its products last year.

Nutrient-content claims can be highly misleading and distort everyday understandings of what constitutes good foods and good diets.

First, by reducing foods - particularly highly processed foods - to the level of their nutrient and chemical composition, nutrient-content claims tend to conceal or distract attention from the actual ingredients, additives and processing techniques used in their production.

Second, even within this chemical-nutrient level of understanding food, there is a further reduction in focus on one or more particular nutrients or food components. This may conceal the overall nutrient profile of the food, such as excessive quantities or the absence of other nutrients.

"Reduced fat" processed foods, for example, do not necessarily have a reduced number of kilojoules, since the reduction in fat is often accompanied by an increase in sugar content. The added sugar is used to mimic the taste and "mouth-feel" of fat.

The proposed food-labelling regulations, which have been released for public debate pending a final decision by the Australia and New Zealand Food Regulation Ministerial Council in the middle of next year, would allow food companies to go one step further than nutrient-content claims, and to advertise a direct connection between a nutrient in a food product and a beneficial health effect.

This also means going one step further along the path of biochemical and nutritional reductionism.

To isolate nutrients from the context of the food in which they are contained and from the broader diet of which they are a part, and to suggest that these isolated nutrients can prevent diseases or provide other health benefits, represents an extremely reductive understanding of the relationship between diet and bodily health.

It is most likely to be nutrients and food components - rather than wholefoods - that will be designated with health claims. The nutrients may be added to or subtracted from a range of processed foods. Such nutrient-fortified food products would then be permitted to advertise the health benefits associated with these nutrients, though subject to some qualifying and disqualifying criteria.

The implication will be that foods carrying such health claims are not just providing basic nutrients - that is, nutrients that are easily obtained in appropriate quantities in a diverse wholefoods diet. Rather, it is implied that these foods are actively delivering some additional and very precise health benefits and which set them apart from other processed foods and even from unprocessed wholefoods.

The proposed regulations make much of a questionable distinction that they set up between "general-level" and "high-level" health claims. High-level claims are those that refer to serious diseases (such as osteoporosis or heart disease) and biomarkers (such as cholesterol or blood pressure).

General-level claims are those that refer to health problems regarded as non-serious, or that merely discuss the content of a nutrient and its function in the body.

Food companies are likely to favour the use of these general-level claims, as they will have fewer restrictions and substantiation requirements, yet they could be used to imply similar health benefits as high-level claims.

After all, what's the difference between the general-level claim "calcium helps build strong bones" and the high-level claim "calcium assists in improving bone mineral density"? For most people, probably not much. Yet the first claim could go on a highly sweetened product, while the added sugar would be somewhat restricted in the high-level claim.

The main disqualifying criteria for making these health claims relate to the quantities of sugar, salt and saturated fat contained in the food. However, there are exceptions to these rules that would, for example, allow high-sugar breakfast cereals with added vitamins to carry a general-level health claim.

The proposed labelling regulations represent a major victory for the food industry, which has been lobbying government for many years to open the door to health claims. But the use of health claims has been consistently opposed by many groups representing the interests of public health, consumers and children.

If the regulations are passed in the coming year, we can expect a flood of processed foods with new labels on the shelves. At a time when there is growing concern over

the health consequences of the overconsumption of processed and convenience foods, it is instructive that federal and state ministers would permit ever more ways of marketing and singing the praises of these foods.

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