

THE PARENTS' JURY RESPONSE TO

LABELLING LOGIC: THE REVIEW OF FOOD LABELLING LAW AND POLICY

INTRODUCTION

The Parents' Jury is an online network of almost 5,000 parents, grandparents and guardians, who are interested in improving the food and physical activity environments of Australian children.

We provide a forum for parents to voice their views and to collectively advocate for positive change around children's food and physical activity issues, particularly in our key concern areas of healthy schools, food marketing to children, physical activity, healthy supermarket checkouts and healthy eating for kids.

The Parents' Jury welcomes the opportunity to respond to Labelling Logic. Our response is derived from the views of our members, so we have chosen to focus particularly on the recommendations concerning consumer interests.

GENERAL THOUGHTS ON LABELLING LOGIC

The Parents' Jury welcomes many of the recommendations in the report; particularly the recognition that consumer need for information is a key policy driver. While research shows children influence food purchasing decisions, parents still choose and buy the bulk of food for the family diet and, if members of The Parents' Jury are any indication, they find it challenging to understand current food labelling.

Recommendations 3 and 4 are positive steps for consumers. A Code that has 'teeth' and whose standards can be effectively monitored and enforced, together with sufficient resources, is critical to ensure consumer protection.

We also support recommendation 5 that information on food labels be presented in a way to enhance understanding across all consumer groups.

The Parents' Jury agrees there is a need for a comprehensive Nutrition Policy outlined in recommendation 9. It is important the consumer has access to standardised and consistent food labels and they understand their meaning, in order to educate themselves. Therefore, clear nutrition criteria and dietary guidance is also important to help educate families across Australia.

We support recommendation 10, as we believe it is important Food Standards Australia New Zealand should be involved in a comprehensive Nutrition Policy.

However, of particular interest to the members of The Parents' Jury are the recommendations (50-55) regarding the introduction of an interpretive, front of pack multiple traffic light (MTL) labelling system. While we welcome the recognition that MTL is the preferred form for food labelling, The Parents' Jury would like to see this introduced on a mandatory basis. If it is introduced only on a voluntary basis, then all foods displaying any kind of claim (including nutrient content claims) should be mandated to display the MTL system.

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Research from organisations such as the Cancer Council,¹ the UK consumer body Which?² and the UK Food Standards Agency³ shows MTL is effective in assisting a wide range of consumers to understand and make healthier food choices. The Parents' Jury is concerned that introducing MTL on a voluntary basis, for both packaged foods and chain service restaurants, allows the food industry to drag its heels on implementation and creates an uneven playing field, leaving consumers without the tools they need to make healthier choices for themselves and their families.

FOOD LABELLING FROM THE PARENT'S POINT OF VIEW

In 2008, we [surveyed](#) members to gauge their views on food labelling. We asked if they check food labels, especially when purchasing unfamiliar foods. Over 90 per cent stated they checked the ingredients list and/or nutrition information panel.

Eighty-five per cent of respondents wanted the government to introduce a compulsory front of pack labelling system. The majority also supported the introduction of an interpretive multiple traffic light labelling (MTL) system that clearly showed high, medium and low levels of fats, sugar and sodium at a glance on the front of packaging.⁴

This year, The Parents' Jury [surveyed](#) its members and asked them their views on multiple traffic light labelling. Over 91 per cent of the 250 respondents want to see MTL on all packaged food products and 90 per cent want to see it extended to cover all items on the menu boards in fast food outlets. Almost 90 per cent supported its mandatory introduction on all packaged food products and in fast food outlets.⁵

The Parents' Jury also asked respondents for their comments. We received over 100 of these, which can be broadly categorised into two general themes.

Parents want a system they can easily understand.

“Easy to understand traffic lights will allow consumers (that is, every person in Australia) to readily distinguish between healthy food, and foodstuffs which cause preventable medical conditions, which cause premature death and needlessly cost the publicly funded healthcare system billions of dollars.”

“The most useful thing for improving health because so many busy people just don't read the current nutrition information panels - or even understands what they mean.

Proponents of other labelling systems suggest multiple traffic light labelling is too simplistic and can be misunderstood by consumers. However, comments from Parents' Jury members dispute this.

¹ Kelly B, Hughes C, Chapman K, Louie J, Dixon H, King L On behalf of a Collaboration of Public Health and Consumer Research Groups. Front-of-Pack Food Labelling: Traffic Light Labelling Gets the Green Light. Cancer Council: Sydney 2008.

² Conquest Research. Food labelling study prepared for Which? UK: 2006.

³ Stockley R, Jordan E, Hunter A, Citizens' forums on food: Front of Pack (FoP) Nutrition Labelling British Market Research Bureau prepared for: Food Standards Agency UK: 2008

⁴ <http://www.parentsjury.org.au/index.php/campaigns-for-change/previous-campaigns/improved-food-labelling/improved-food-labelling-issues>

⁵ <http://www.parentsjury.org.au/index.php/key-concerns/healthy-eating-for-kids/understanding-food-labels/the-future-of-food-labelling>

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This group of consumers believes current labelling, both nutrition information panels and the daily intake guide, is already confusing and difficult to understand. MTL are more likely to act as an easy-to-follow guide for shoppers to judge, at a glance, the content of food they plan to purchase. They can also compare between products and understand the levels of nutrients of concern, such as salt, fats and sugars.

MTL does not have to replace nutrition information panels. Rather, consumers who want more detailed information could still consult it.

“I hope our government will listen to consumers rather than the food industry. I can't understand why food industry is so resistant to traffic light labelling when they happily put %RDI's which is complex and time consuming compared to traffic light labelling.”

“Much easier to understand and helps (us) choose healthy foods, than trying to work out DI % which means absolutely nothing to most people.”

Parents want to teach their children about nutrition.

“Traffic light labelling is a smart move for everyone but (it) will benefit kids the most - what could be easier to teach and learn than choosing more green than yellow and red foods?”

“It would be an excellent visual to aid in teaching children about sometimes foods and everyday foods. Many parents do not have the nutritional education to know what is the best choice, especially when it comes to fast food that is marketed as being a better choice when in fact it may not be.”

With one-quarter of Australian children estimated to be overweight or obese⁶, education needs to take place to teach this and following generations about the importance of a healthy diet. Multiple traffic light labelling will assist all parents, from all demographic groups, to teach their children the benefits of healthier foods.

Many school canteens across Australia have introduced traffic light labelling to their menus, in order to teach children about healthy eating. Having the same system in on packaged foods in supermarkets will enhance this message to the whole family and support existing education tools.

“Lack of clear labelling prevents me from keeping myself and my children safe and healthy. Traffic light labelling must be mandatory so parents can choose healthy foods and teach their children to do the same.”

“A great kid-friendly approach, so not just parents have the opportunity to choose wisely/be informed and vigilant.”

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics. National Health Survey: Summary of Results. 2007- 08. Cat No. 4364.0. Canberra 2009.

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CONCLUSION

The Parents' Jury endorses many of the recommendations made by the Food Labelling Review Panel. The focus on the needs of the consumer is welcomed and supported by our members.

However, in order for the Panel's recommendations to be successful, allowing consumers across all levels of the population to understand the content of the food they purchase, interpretative front of pack multiple traffic light labelling must be introduced on a mandatory basis. This should include packaged foods, chain service restaurants and food in vending machines.

"It's such a great concept! A simple way that we can teach our kids to consider what they are eating, and hopefully develop a healthier generation of teens and adults. It has wins all round: food production companies would hopefully take more personal responsibility. There would be a greater awareness for all families, no matter their level of education, and we could set our kids up to be looking after their health by watching what they eat. We will be doing future generations a service by educating them about how food affects their health."

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