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Food and Nutrition Policy in Europe

Proceedings of the Second European Conference on Food and
Nutrition Policy
The Hague, 21 - 24 April 1992

D.G. van der Heij, M.R.H. Löwik and Th. Ockhuizen (Editors)
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Report of the workshop 'How can food producers and retailers make the healthy choices the easy choices?'

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Introduction

The European food system is complex and dynamic and the topic of this workshop represents a major challenge to virtually all the players in the food system. The purpose of the workshop is to attempt to obtain a consensus as to whether the topic is just an aspiration, or a realisable goal, or somewhere in-between. This introductory note focuses on some of the issues but does not attempt to give any of the answers.

The inputs to the topic are numerous and collectively form an interactive matrix which is difficult to dissect into stand-alone components. Firstly, there is continued confusion among health professionals about many of the dietary issues of today and this spills over to the consumer which is a 'bad start' in focusing on at least some of the healthy dietary options. Secondly, food purchase/choice in Europe is related to many factors including product sensory quality and diversity, price and value for money, promotion and advertising, cultural/traditional and regional preferences, and health considerations. These interact with consumer beliefs and motivation to purchase, with level of education and disposable income, with sub-groups within the consumer population; these in turn interact with agricultural food production policies and with the retailing policy of the supermarkets.

The so-called healthy choices are often of inferior sensory quality to the 'real thing', e.g. fat spreads vs butter; low fat vs whole milk; unsalted vs salted bread; sauceless food dishes. This currently militates against choosing the healthy options and challenges food technologists to create products which match the sensory quality of the 'real thing' while maintaining product safety, wholesomeness and a high degree of naturalness. Other aspects which aid healthy choices include competitive or lower pricing (currently the healthy choices are usually more expensive), and balanced consumer education on diet and nutrition.

The explosion of functional foods, while desirable, must be kept in context and one must ask 'Does a balanced diet not give us Europeans all the "functionality" we need?'. Central to the whole issue of healthy choices is the area of health claims and this must be regarded as both an ongoing and potential minefield which will be

increasingly difficult to interpret and to police as foods become more complex and functional.

The Common Agricultural Policy has dominated food production in Europe for many years and some aspects of the policy do not facilitate the healthy-choice/easy-choice slogan. In view of this, a balancing integrated downstream policy should be developed which is concerned with the quality and safety of the food supply in human nutrition terms.

It can be argued that the complexity of the European food system and of current food-health issues leaves the European consumer wide open to exploitation by the food industry and by retailers in relation to the foods produced and sold on the shelves. However, the opposite view must also be tabled, i.e. that the food and retail industries do have the consumers' best interest in mind and will promote food products and especially the healthy choices in a responsible and balanced way. In this context the power of supermarkets to influence food choice must never be underestimated. Increasingly supermarkets are becoming advice bureaus, food factories (e.g. in-store bakeries; sausage making; preparation of ready-to-eat and microwavable foods), retailers, restaurants, and places of social interaction and so have a central role in the development of the healthy-choice/easy-choice concept in the Europe of the future.

Report

In affluent societies consumers' food choice is influenced by many factors which together form an interactive matrix. It is difficult to assess the effect of individual factors as well as the effect of the whole complex. Well known factors are education, culture and religion, income, etc. Besides, the type and quality of food on the market, the price and the outlets where food is available can strongly influence food choice and consumption.

As can be read from the title, the workshop focused primarily on the role food producers and retailers play or could play in helping the consumer make a more healthy choice. In six presentations by speakers from different parts of the world, an impression of the possibilities in this field was given. The presentations and the discussion – it was generally felt that time for discussion fell short – are summarized below.

W.S. Shrapnel (Australia) reported on an interesting experiment in Australia in which a logo with the claim 'healthy foodstuffs' was used in supermarkets. The idea behind this logo – an initiative of the Australian Heart Foundation – is to make it more easy for the consumer to pick from the thousands of food products offered in today's supermarkets the products that are especially valuable to compose a balanced diet. The background of the project is that for many people the way foods are commonly labelled is too complicated and hence not of much help. That may partly explain why many consumers read the labels only partially or not at all.

Research has shown that claims can be far more effective than nutrient labelling in

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attracting the consumers's attention and influencing the consumer's food choice. However claims often focus on one specific aspect of the product in question., such as the high content of a specific vitamin or the low content of fat or cholesterol. Only in few cases claims are used to communicate the wholesomeness of a product in a global sense. Such claims could be really helpful to the consumer in making a better choice. The Australian logo can be considered as an example of a general claim. In using the logo the main nutritional goals are taken into account, not only those related to coronary heart disease. The main criteria are (saturated) fat, salt, cholesterol, fibre and sugar.

An advisory committee decides on requests for the logo from the industry and from retailers. Educational tools are used to inform the consumers and producers on the meaning and possibilities of the logo. Although the interest in the logo is increasing, the industry is also expressing doubts, in particular as to the implicit discrimination of products not bearing the logo. The logo is sought for a wide range of products based on meat, cereals, vegetables, fruits, fat, meals, and so on. Generally speaking, the consumers think positively about this initiative of the Australian Heart Foundation.

The products bearing the logo are not necessarily more expensive than comparable products. However low-fat meat and meat products are usually are more expensive.

Research among consumers has shown that the logo is widely known and well understood. The sales of logo-marked products have increased. Although industries are free to develop their own logos, so far they have not felt the need to do so. It is generally seen as an advantage that the logo is administered by an independent and non-commercial organization.

C. Kistemaker (Netherlands) presented the results of a study in which a model was tested that can predict the effect of substituting in the diet high-fat products for low-fat products. It may be expected that using low-fat products may lead to the use of (different) high-fat products on other moments during the day.

The study, based on recent data from a large-scale food consumption survey in the Dutch population, has shown that the choice of low-fat meat, low-fat meat products and low-fat margarine has a positive effect: total dietary fat intake remains significantly below the initial level. In this study the effect of substitution in terms of total energy intake was not taken into account. However, it is assumed that the difference is too small to influence the validity of the results substantially.

It was concluded that models like this one may prove an interesting and cost-effective way of studying the effect of certain changes in food consumption. The predictability is expected to be very high.

Next, two speakers presented the experiences with the 'Let op Vet' ('Fat Watch') campaign aimed at lowering fat consumption in the Netherlands. After publication in 1985 of the Nutrition Guidelines by the Dutch Nutrition Council, P.J. Anema told the audience, the ministries of Public Health and Agriculture took the initiative to install a steering committee Healthy Nutrition. This committee was given the task to promote activities that may contribute to a reduction of the contribution of fat to total energy

intake from the present average of 40% to 36%. The project was inspired by the notion that the high fat consumption in the Netherlands is considered to be the most important health-threatening imbalance in the average Dutch diet. In the committee all parties involved cooperated, such as the government, educational organizations, the industry and retailers. After a starting period in which activities were kept low-key and no clear results were obtained, the idea of a four-year campaign was born. Generally, people seem to be aware of the necessity to lower fat consumption. The campaign aims at attracting attention, changing attitudes and, ultimately, changing behaviour, i.e. food choice and consumption.

The core of the campaign consists in a TV commercial and a brochure available in the supermarkets which is considered an important place for influencing consumers' food choice. The campaign does not discriminate between food products but attempts to make clear to the consumer that a wide offer is available from which the informed consumer can make a sound choice. Further, it is explained that a low-fat diet can be quite palatable and needs not be expensive. Research has shown that the campaign is well known to the consumer.

A retailer, N.W. Roemers, subsequently reported on the experience of his company with the campaign. It had been stated at the start of the campaign that retailers are not responsible for consumers but that, on the other hand, healthy and long-lived consumers are better customers. Therefore, apart from any doubts about moral obligations, there are commercial reasons to cooperate in activities aiming at improving the consumer's food choice. In the campaign period, in the month of March, some healthy products were advertised through the same tools that were regularly used for advertising. It appeared that advertising had hardly any effect on sales. This result may be considered disappointing and unexpected. However, it was concluded that the campaign's duration was too short to allow for more striking results.

It is assumed that this type of action may increase consumer awareness of healthy products. On the long run this may lead to changes in food choice.

T. Sharp (UK) highlighted the problems and possibilities related to health choices. The first requisite is scientific consensus on what a healthy diet is. This requisite is met more successfully now than in the recent past. Further, the message must be clearly understood. The complicated scientific truth is hard to translate in easily understandable consumer information. Next, the producer must have sufficient freedom to advertise his products. Especially when regulations pertaining to claims are too rigid, it may be difficult to convince the consumer of the importance of a given product for a healthy diet.

For producers (and consumers) the costs of product improvement are of great importance. Sugar and fat are attractive, tasty and cheap ingredients. Substituting these for more healthy components can influence both processing, taste and price.

In considering changes in the product formula it is important that the resulting product will still fit in with common consumption patterns. Otherwise it will prove too difficult to sell the product. Low-fat milk products, although generally considered

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slightly less palatable, are good examples of successful better balanced products. Taking all this into account, novel foods can also find their place in daily diet. The speaker presented an example of a mycoprotein product.

The final speaker, H.W. Vaandrager (Netherlands) reported on the SUPER project. In five cities (Liverpool, UK; Eindhoven, Netherlands; Reims, France; Valencia, Spain; Horsens, Denmark) an educational project had been implemented. Healthy dietary habits are the main goal but, since it aims at changing life-style, other aspects are also taken into account. The project focuses on the higher socio-economic strata because these are likely to be more willing to adopt new ways of living, to be more interested in new products, and so on.

In this approach attention is hardly paid to specific products. One of the efforts made is to make information more attractive, in the form of labels, leaflets, etc. Information from the different national project is compared to discuss the result and to learn from each other's experience. At the time of the workshop results were hardly available as in most cities the project had started in the end of 1991.

Final remarks

In the short time left after the lectures had been presented the following remarks were made.

- The budget for advertising exceeds by far the budget available for education. Moreover, advertising does not concentrate on healthy basic foodstuffs, but primarily on fancy food products.
- In general, such products as potatoes and vegetables may be considered as healthy products. They are cheap as well. In education and advertisements the importance of these products should be stressed. Enhancing the preference for these products will result in a more balanced food consumption pattern.
- In practice, it has been shown to be possible to lower fat intake from, for example, hamburgers, without changing consumer preference. These possibilities should be employed more frequently.
- Assuming that the basis for healthy nutrition is laid during early childhood, nutrition education should aim at specific population groups such as mothers with young children.
- It is essential to make optimal use of the limited financial resources. The EC could play a coordinating role.