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## RESEARCH BULLETIN

### DEFINING HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY FOOD:

### FRENCH FRIES ARE HEALTHY!

*McDonald's French Fries are healthy - that's official. But wait there's more - McCain's SuperFries Chunky Cut, McCain's SuperFries Shoestring, McCain's Healthy Choice Fries, Birdseye Golden Crumb Chips, Birdseye Golden Cut Fries and Watties (Heinz) Crunchy Cut Originals, all available at your local supermarket, are also officially healthy. This must come as quite a shock to health advocates who maintain that French Fries are unhealthy. In reality what has happened is that French Fries have undergone substantial technological changes which has been unnoticed by the health advocates.*

Government and health group experts and advocates consistently tell us that we should eat less unhealthy food and more healthy food. Furthermore, some experts and advocates maintain, advertising of unhealthy food should be banned. When asked what is healthy and unhealthy the general answer is foods high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS foods) are unhealthy and fruit and vegetables are healthy. But there are exceptions, the experts tell us, such as fruit for although some fruits are high in sugar they are still healthy. But when it comes to fruit juices the experts and advocates are divided with some saying juices are healthy and others maintaining they are unhealthy. The bigger question is how high is high fat, sugar and salt.

#### **United Kingdom**

Consumer confusion has led industry to challenge Governments and health groups to define healthy and unhealthy foods. In the United Kingdom the broadcasting regulator Office of Communications (OFCOM) was concerned about television advertising of HFSS food that was seen by children. It commissioned former Australian Sonia Livingstone of the London School of

Economics to undertake two research projects on the issue of the influence of television advertising on the food choices by children. This research along with other research led OFCOM to conclude "*advertising had a modest, direct effect on children's food choices and a larger but unquantifiable indirect effect on children's food preferences, consumption and behaviour*"

OFCEM then went the next step of designing a regulatory regime that would substantially reduce the number of HFSS television advertisements children under 16 would be exposed to. It therefore decided that where a television programme had an audience composition in which the proportion of children 4-15 is at least 20% higher than would be found in the population in general then advertising of HFSS foods would be prohibited. In practice it effectively bans HFSS food advertisements until 9 PM.

To define HFSS foods it adopted a Nutrient Profiling Model devised by Mike Rayner and three colleagues for the Food Standards Agency. The Model is complex and relies on a scoring system. It has two screens. The first measures the "bad" points scoring the amount of energy, saturated fat, sugar and salt in a food or drink. The second screen measures the "good" points for fruit and vegetables, fibre and protein, which are deducted from the bad points. If a drink scores 1 or more or a food 4 or more then it is deemed unhealthy and cannot be advertised to children.

Anomalies were immediately obvious. Marmite, Vegemite, olive oil, many types of milk, butter, margarine, cheese, jams, most cereals, etc are deemed unhealthy and subject to the advertising ban. Breakfast is most difficult - toast is fine but with nothing on it.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

All of this was happening in the United Kingdom and was of little relevance to Australia and New Zealand although many health advocates maintained that Australia and New Zealand should adopt a similar system.

At the beginning of April Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) published its Preliminary Final Assessment Report on Proposal 293, Nutrition, Health and Related Claims. The P293 consultation has been ongoing for several years and when completed will provide the rules for the making of food health and nutrition claims. Reform is well overdue as currently advertising the benefits of healthy food, except freshness and price, is prohibited. Even the word "healthy" is banned - healthy food cannot be described as healthy. FSANZ were faced with the problem of defining what foods would qualify for the making of health claims. The Report proposes that the Rayner Nutrient Profiling Model be adopted with a variation that would allow milk, dairy products, edible oils and margarines to be categorised as healthy rather than unhealthy. This is eminently sensible as it removes many of the anomalies in the UK model.

The same screening system is used with the first screen measuring the "bad" points scoring the amount of energy, saturated fat, sugar and salt in a food or drink. The second screen measures the "good" points for fruit and vegetables, fibre and protein, which are deducted from the "bad" points. As in the UK if a drink scores 1 or more or a food 4 or more then it is deemed unhealthy. If the final score is less than 1 for a drink or less than 4 for a food then it is deemed to be a healthy food which is eligible to make a health claim.

What we now have is Nutrient Profiling Model that will be used in United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand to measure whether a food is healthy or unhealthy. It is a black and white model with no shades of grey. Either the food is healthy or unhealthy. However because the FSANZ model has a variation, some foods that are unhealthy in UK are healthy in Australia and New Zealand.

### **Healthy and Unhealthy Foods**

The key issue is what is the practical effect of the nutrient profiling. We randomly measured a number of everyday foods both under the UK model and under the proposed FSANZ model that will apply to Australia and New Zealand. If the food failed to meet the required score then it was considered to be unhealthy and if it met the criteria and eligible to make a health claim then it was considered healthy.

Not surprisingly Mallowpuff biscuits were unhealthy by a wide margin. Somewhat surprisingly Griffins Vitalife Digestives green pack, which the pack states (correctly) are low in saturated fat and high in fibre, are still deemed to be unhealthy.

Marmite and Vegemite were also considered to be unhealthy mainly because of the high sodium content. The model does not take into account that such spreads are used sparingly but uses a per 100 gram measure. The standard Marmite jar we examined contained 250 grams so the model assumes that the jar would be used in 2.5 servings. The manufacturer recommended a serving size of 5 grams. Vegemite also recommend a serving size of 5 grams not a whole small jar of 115 grams that we inspected. Literally millions of Australians and New Zealanders have been brought up on a diet of Marmite/Vegemite on toast or in sandwiches because it was "good" for us. This is a contradiction that can be simply remedied by the model recognising small serving sizes for products used sparingly.

The same argument applies to Coleman's Dry mustard sold in a 113 gram tin. Coleman's recommended serving size is 2.5 grams - not the whole tin. Prepared mayonnaise is also within this category- both Eta Mayonnaise and Eta Lite and Free Mayonnaise are deemed unhealthy under the model.

Jams are unhealthy and we could not find one that is healthy despite the fruit content, which attracts “good” points. Honey is also unhealthy as it has too much sugar despite its other qualities.

The butter brands we examined (including unsalted) were also found to be unhealthy despite the FSANZ model being generous to dairy and edible oil products. However most margarines we examined including Meadowlea margarine, Olivani Light margarine, Flora Canola and Omega 3, Flora Pro-Active Light and Logical Lite margarine were healthy. Interestingly these entire margarines would be unhealthy under the UK model. It was the FSANZ variation to the model that made them healthy in Australia and New Zealand.

All breads we examined, multi-grain and white, were healthy.

Cereals had mixed results. Weet-Bix was healthy by a wide margin. Nestle Cheerios, Kellogg’s Guardian, Hubbards Reduced Fat Muesli, WeightWatchers Fruity Muesli and Harraway’s Scotch Oats were all healthy. However there are a good number that did not make the cut. Interestingly the ratings by Choice magazine were inconsistent with the FSANZ model so Choice may need to reassess their ratings.

Under the FSANZ model milk gets favourable treatment. Both Calci Smart and Anchor Trim Long Life are healthy. Anchor Full Bodied fresh milk is healthy but would be unhealthy in the UK. All of the flavoured milks we examined are healthy. However cream, including lite cream, is deemed unhealthy, as the saturated fat content is too high

The model has clearly targeted snacks. ETA Uppercuts Chips and Bluebird Health Plus Chips are both deemed unhealthy. Act II Light popcorn is considered unhealthy on a technical aspect of the scoring. Unsalted almonds are healthy but both salted and unsalted cashews are deemed unhealthy.

Virtually all types of cheeses are considered unhealthy in the UK but FSANZ has adopted a more commonsense approach and recognises that cheese also has nutritious value. However most of the cheeses we examined were unhealthy, usually by a small margin. However Bega Super- Light Sliced Cheese From Bonland, Galaxy Creamy Feta and Kraft Philadelphia Cream Cheese Light make the cut in Australia and New Zealand and are deemed healthy.

Both yoghurts and fruit smoothies are generally considered healthy by the model.

Peanut Butter is a puzzle. Both Sanitarium and ETA Peanut Butter have well over 90% peanut content but are probably considered healthy by the model if the peanuts are considered to be “ground”.

Heinz Wattie Vegetable Soup is scored as healthy as is its condensed Tomato Soup. Campbell's condensed Pea and Ham soup and condensed Cream of Pumpkin Soup are also healthy.

We are told that French Fries are unhealthy but that depends on how they are prepared. All of the frozen French Fries we examined were prepared in Canola or similar oil and were healthy according to the model. We suspect that this is a dramatic change compared with some years ago.

The difference between the UK and the FSANZ models is highlighted by the treatment of edible oils. Generally oils are deemed to be very unhealthy in the UK but healthy in Australia and New Zealand. This was true for a boutique high-grade olive oil with the Leafyridge brand name, Lupi the commonly used cooking olive oil, Olivado Avocado oil, AMCO peanut oil and Olivado Macadamia Oil. FSANZ have recognised the health values of edible oils and should be applauded for that. None of these products can be advertised on television during children's viewing times in the UK.

### **Fast Food**

This study concentrates on everyday foods found in households. However as McDonald's and Coca-Cola attract consistent criticism from high profile health advocates we had a quick overview of their range of products in Australia and New Zealand. It should be emphasised that the McDonald's menu in Australia is not identical to the New Zealand menu. Similarly the Coca-Cola range of products is different in the two countries.

It appears that more than a third of the McDonald's range of food and beverages is classified as healthy by the FSANZ Nutrient Profiling model. In the case of Coca-Cola about half of their range of drinks would be classified as healthy. We believe that these estimates are conservative and could be significantly higher.

Both brands have responded to criticism by reformulating their products and bringing out new products. Coca-Cola has introduced Coke Zero and Sprite Zero, which are sugar-free; McDonald's has introduced salads and a range of lighter choices. However the most dramatic change has been the change in cooking methods for the much-maligned French Fries. The French Fries now have a low level of saturated fat, as have the frozen French Fries available at the Supermarket, and qualify as a healthy food under the FSANZ model. The fries will be eligible to make a health claim.

In the past both McDonald's and Coca-Cola have gained little credit from health advocates for menu changes and product formulation. For example when McDonald's introduced salads it was accused of being insincere and few salads would be sold. This has not turned out to be the case. Salads are a big seller for McDonald's and Coca-Cola's sales of sugar-free drinks have been quite sensational.

One of the underlying objectives behind the ANZFA Nutrient Profiling model is to encourage companies to reformulate their products to a healthier standard. One of the problems industry faced is that there was no standard. Many products such as cheese require very little reformulation to meet the healthy standard. We can expect to see a range of foods and beverages being reformulated to meet the new standard.

A consequence of not analysing specific foods against a standard is that some researchers have made wrong assumptions, which has skewed the results of their research. An example is the soon to be published research by Kelly and others of the Australian Centre for Health Promotion at the University of Sydney entitled "Television food advertising to children: the extent and nature of exposure". The research analysed advertisements on three Sydney television channels in May 2006. It found that 48.6% of the food advertisements in children's viewing times and 39% in adult viewing times were, in their view, for HFSS foods. However included in these figures were advertisements for Fast-food Restaurants which were counted as 14.5% and 8.3% respectively. It was wrongly assumed that 100% of the menus of such restaurants consisted of HFSS foods. This is plainly incorrect. There has been a lack of understanding between brand and menu.

## **Conclusion**

One interesting feature is that various health authorities in both Australia and New Zealand have sought to introduce various nutritional guidelines such as the New South Wales traffic light system for foods sold in school canteens. However the classification of various foods varies from regime to regime. The FSANZ Nutrient Profiling model will have the force of law so it will be most difficult for an authority to rely on historical perceptions and say that flavoured milk, sugar-free soft drink or fries are unhealthy when they are formulated in such a way that they are deemed healthy by the model. Companies will have the ability to legally challenge health groups and authorities that classify the products as unhealthy. We are heading into fascinating times.

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