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and stroke

european heart network

EHN Statement on the hybrid traffic light scheme

February 2014

Background

We are aware that Italy is raising concerns about the UK hybrid traffic light system in several Council constellations, including the Agriculture and Fisheries Council, the Competitiveness Council and the Health and Consumer Affairs Council. We are making this statement in response to assertions made by Italy.

The Food Information to Consumers regulation - 1169/2011 (FIC) - was adopted against the backdrop of a growing prevalence of overweight and obesity as well as an increasing burden of diet-related chronic diseases. The Commission White Paper of 30 May 2007 on a Strategy for Europe on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity related health issues recognises that nutrition labelling is one important measure to help consumers make informed choices with regards to nutrition.

Evidence for traffic light labelling/hybrid traffic light labelling

There is a substantial body of evidence which shows that at-a-glance front-of-pack labelling augments consumers' capacity to discern the healthiness of a food product and to understand its nutritional components better. There is evidence from several countries that consumers understand and can use the traffic light scheme¹ as well as a hybrid scheme which combines traffic light colour-coding and percentages of daily reference intakes^{2,3}.

Therefore, it is highly likely that the hybrid traffic light scheme will help consumers better understand the contribution of food and drinks in relation to the nutrient content of a diet.

Is the Mediterranean diet likely to be classified as “unhealthy” by the hybrid traffic light scheme?

The traditional Mediterranean diet is well-known for its health-promoting and health-preserving qualities. The Mediterranean diet is not defined by the nutritional quality of any one of the food products of which it is made up. The Mediterranean diet is not exported, only individual food products are.

Therefore, the Mediterranean diet will not be classified as unhealthy by the hybrid traffic light scheme.

¹ [http://cancercouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/foodlabelling_frontofpack_surveyreport.pdf?_utma=206313729.1112853082.1391522501.1391522501.1391522501.1&_utmb=206313729.4.10.1391522501&_utmc=206313729&_utmz=206313729.1391522501.1.1.utmcsr=\(direct\)|utmccn=\(direct\)|utmcmd=\(none\)&_utmv=206313729.1|I=Visitor_Segment=Suspect=1^3=Newsletter_Subscription_Status=Not_Subscribed=1&_utmk=49391909](http://cancercouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/foodlabelling_frontofpack_surveyreport.pdf?_utma=206313729.1112853082.1391522501.1391522501.1391522501.1&_utmb=206313729.4.10.1391522501&_utmc=206313729&_utmz=206313729.1391522501.1.1.utmcsr=(direct)|utmccn=(direct)|utmcmd=(none)&_utmv=206313729.1|I=Visitor_Segment=Suspect=1^3=Newsletter_Subscription_Status=Not_Subscribed=1&_utmk=49391909)

² http://www.bmelv.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/Ernaehrung/Kennzeichnung/UmfrageNaehrwertkennzeichnungDiagramme.pdf?_blob=publicationFile

³ <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/pmpreport.pdf>

Will foods benefiting from EU Quality schemes be identified as “bad” product by the hybrid traffic light scheme? Is there a contradiction in EU regulations?

The hybrid traffic lights scheme does not give an indication of the overall quality of food products nor does it label food products as good or bad. It provides information of the level of certain components in a food product: fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt.

Therefore, foods benefiting from EU Quality schemes will not be identified as “bad” products by the hybrid traffic light scheme.

Under the FIC, all food products - including those benefitting from EU Quality schemes - must bear back-of-pack nutrition labelling. Front-of-pack nutrition labelling is voluntary.

Therefore, there is no contradiction in EU regulations and no contradiction in messages conveyed to consumers.

Will a voluntary nationally recommended nutrition labelling scheme have an impact on the functioning of the EU Internal Market?

At the adoption of the FIC, EU legislators decided that it was too early to adopt a harmonised EU front-of-pack nutrition labelling scheme. The need for testing different schemes was underlined. Consequently, the FIC contains an article (Article 35) that allows Member States to recommend to food business operators the use of a nutrition declaration which fulfils a list of criteria set out in the FIC.

The UK government's recommendation that food operators use the hybrid traffic light scheme does not discriminate against non-UK food products nor does it create any obstacles to the free movement of goods. All food products can be exported to and placed on the UK market, provided they fulfil the provisions in the FIC.

Therefore, a voluntary nationally recommended nutrition labelling scheme will not have an impact on the functioning of the EU Internal Market in violation of the general free movement provisions of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and Articles 34 and 36 more specifically.

Concluding remarks

The European Union faces a growing prevalence in overweight and obesity and an increasing burden of diet-related chronic diseases. For decades, the EU and governments as well as industry and non-governmental organisations have experimented with nutrition labelling schemes. The objectives of governments and non-governmental organisations are for such schemes to help consumers understand the nutritional composition of a food product and construct a diet which is balanced and health-promoting and health-preserving.

There is evidence from several countries that the hybrid traffic light nutrition scheme will help consumers better understand the contribution of food and drinks in relation to the nutrient content of a diet.

There is no evidence that:

- ***the Mediterranean diet will be classified as unhealthy by the hybrid traffic light scheme***
- ***foods benefiting from EU Quality schemes will be identified as “bad” products by the hybrid traffic light scheme***
- ***there is a contradiction in EU regulations and a contradiction in messages conveyed to consumers***
- ***a voluntary nationally recommended nutrition labelling scheme will hinder the free movement of goods and the functioning of the EU Internal Market***