



Consequences

In their concern for the diet of the nation, the Food Standards Agency has devised a system for clear labelling. This involves putting colours on packages, like traffic lights, to indicate the amounts of salt, fat, sugar and other “nasties” that the food contains per 100 grams. The system has been adopted by some of the major retailers like Sainsbury, Asda and the Co-op. Foods with too much of these ingredients are coded red. The system has been rejected by others as being too simplistic. These firms, like Tesco, PepsiCo, and Nestlé, think that a system based on guideline daily amounts is superior. They argue that many people will not eat 100 grams of some products. So the labelling issue is in dispute.

In order to protect children from foods that might make them obese if eaten to excess Ofcom has decided to ban the advertising of unhealthy products at certain times. To decide which products are unhealthy they thought that the foods the FSA coded red should be chosen.

So as from March this year any food that contains too much salt, sugar, saturated fat or just fat per 100 grams may not be advertised during times when children are expected to be watching television. This raises an interesting point. Red coded foods contain too much per 100 grams. Some people do not eat 100 grams of some products in a week, that alone at one sitting. The result is that foods like honey, cheese, ketchup, raisins and Marmite may not be advertised. However, some crisps, chips and bread are considered OK.

The Grocer has started a campaign against this rather puerile approach pointing out that many major firms have already reduced saturated fats, salt and sugar in their products. They argue that a child is better off after a breakfast of cereals than a bag of crisps. Flora margarine has cut its fat content by 30% over five years. Few people would have more than 20 grams on two slices of bread. And yet Flora cannot advertise the fact. Kellogg has reduces salt by up to 40% and yet almost all cereals come under the ban. So it would be far more logical to base restrictions on the amounts children are likely to eat.

However, some others like the Children’s Food Campaign, believe that half the population will not understand percentages. So the colour system is much better. We suspect that the battle will rage for some time as the guideline daily amount supporters have put up £4 million to promote their system. The Food Standards Agency is running a TV advertising campaign coupled with press adverts to put forward their traffic light idea. That is going to cost a lot, but then it is only public money. The Grocer says the Ofcom concept is ludicrous as no one would eat half a large pot of Marmite with half a tub of margarine at one sitting. And cheese in moderation is good for growing children. The FSA responds by saying that the Grocer does not understand nutritional science.

We will report further as matters develop.