

The Food Industry's Response to Obesity

Gaynor Bussell

Nutrition Manager, Food and Drink Federation

The Food and Drink Industry has an annual output of £66 billion, accounting for 15% of the total manufacturing sector and employs 500,000 people, representing 13% of the UK manufacturing workforce and is the largest manufacturing sector in the UK. The Industry is represented by the Food and Drink Federation (FDF) and its members are food and drink manufacturing companies, large and small, and trade associations dealing with specific food and drink sectors

The FDF as part of the UK food and drink chain is committed to being part of the solution to issues on diet and health by forging partnerships in the food chain, providing a choice of foods from which consumers can choose a balanced diet, by ensuring good consumer information and by working with Government and other stakeholders. We are also working with the Office of Communications on advertising to children and the vending industry by bringing a commitment to wider choice, initiating healthy workplace programmes within the industry and reviewing the provision of larger portion sizes

We shall need to work together if we are to progress; not just the manufacturing sector, but the entire food and marketing chain. We shall also need to join up with Government, health professionals and educators to help individuals

make better informed decisions about what to eat and how active to be.

The retailers, the hospitality and food service sector, the farmers and manufacturers joined together to respond to the Government's Food and Health Action Plan Problem Analysis. This joint response in June 2003 was a first and the beginning of a long list of similar actions. We intend to take this joined up route wherever possible, because we think it makes it easier for Government and others to deal with us if we have initially agreed our own positions.

Choice is important, not everyone wants a lower fat or sugar product and for some it is nutritionally not desirable (see below). But for the large numbers of people who wish to lose weight or control their weight, there is plenty of choice, and that choice is expanding. As the importance of ingredients such as plant sterols and stanols (for cholesterol lowering), omega 3 oils, pre- and probiotics become better known, industry will continue to innovate and to produce a wider range of functional foods.

Consumer information takes a number of forms, on the pack, from consumer help lines and from specific communications programmes. Industry is keen to ensure labelling is meaningful and objective, but we do not agree with "traffic lights" or profiling, as an individual food can not be deemed good or bad, only whole diets,



assessed over several days can be deemed as good or bad. Many brand manufacturers and retail manufacturers voluntarily add extra information such as Salt Equivalents and full nutritional data per 100g as well as per portion .

The food industry is also keen to provide objective factual information such as Guideline Daily Amounts that are based on Government dietary goals. A particular drawback is the space on a label, especially if the information is to be readable and for this reason many manufacturers provide information in other formats, such as web-based or information leaflets.

There are several consumer information programmes produced by FDF eg *foodlink* – about food safety; *foodfitness* – about how to achieve a balanced diet and healthy lifestyle, and *foodfuture* – attempting to give objective information about Genetically Modified and other novel technologies. We use experts in their field to compile the information that goes into these schemes. These are supported by an extensive range of activities countrywide, organised by the food and drink industry.

We contribute to many consultations with the Department of Health, the Food Standards Agency, the Health Select Committee, the Medical Research Council and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. We shall

continue to engage with Government when the White Paper on Public Health is published. Some of industry's nutrition and communication experts sit on various advisory panels to Government led initiatives such as *Food in Schools* that is trying to develop a "whole school approach to nutrition" and also a panel that implemented and evaluated the food and well being strategy in Wales.

Public health nutrition must be dealt with carefully. Not everyone requires reduced calories, for example there are many people who are malnourished, especially if they have had a spell in hospital. Very active people, the elderly and the very young cannot survive on a diet which is very bulky and devoid of some calorie dense foods. Calorie intake has already fallen dramatically. There is a danger that if calorie intake falls below 1,500, as in some young women, then micronutrients go short. Indeed we are already seeing some serious micronutrient shortages especially amongst children, the elderly and young women.

Deeming certain foods as bad, through nutrient profiling or by applying a red traffic light against them may lead to some people avoiding these foods, thus cutting down on the range of foods eaten which is a sure way to bring about micronutrient deficiencies. It may also escalate an already rapidly

increasing problem of eating disorders, from full blown anorexia to bulaemia to a new and emerging disorder where individuals become obsessed with only eating so called "healthy food".

Industry is proposing a Government led, joint multi-media consumer information programme, providing consistent messages on food and health, agreed between Government and partners, as part of its commitment to inform and educate the public, and because we see information and education as an important step in enabling people to change their dietary habits for the better.

The companies in the food chain connect in a direct manner with just about every single person in the country. We take and amplify Government information to a degree never before achieved. The "Think!" campaign might serve as a useful model – industry may be willing to put in funding to run a similar high profile scheme through a number of media outlets. This could be linked to on-pack messages. Details will have to be agreed in discussion with Government. Consumers buy hundreds of millions of food products and services every day and it would be a gigantic step change in the level of communication if only a fraction of these carried health and lifestyle messages or even sign-posted where consumers could get information.

For its part, Government should

implement a "Curry style" group comprising a wide range of people with the expertise and ability to develop and implement the forthcoming white paper on public health. It should ensure that pertinent and relevant research on obesity is carried out. Money may be needed to enable such research to take place. It should also ensure health professionals receive adequate training on diet and health. Surveillance is essential and a robust method is needed for evaluating dietary intake trends and increased physical activity levels that should be encouraged. It should also ensure schools allow syllabus time for physical activity and see that there is a whole school approach to diet and health that includes teaching cooking skills and generating enthusiasm for food preparation and diet.

Balanced lifestyle is the best response linked to greater personal accountability in a co-ordinated well thought out strategy; not kneejerk reactions or short term fixes. Individuals need empowering to make an appropriate healthy balanced choice and a long term education process is also vital, including a whole school approach. Society as a whole has to decide to what extent Government should intervene in the food and health debate. Whatever the decision, industry is ready and willing to play its part in delivering solutions.

In discussion the following points were made:

All six of the targets described in the White paper have been missed. Government departments, including the Food Standards Agency, have all failed to curb the tide of obesity set to swamp us all in fat and the impression has been created that no one is directly responsible for the problem or is prepared to do anything about it. There was no obesity during World War 2 when government ration books regulated the purchase from retail outlets of precise amounts of specified dietary components sufficient for an adequate diet. The unfortunate trend that started thirty years ago of closing down health clinics has not helped the maintenance of healthy lifestyles in the general population. The response of the food industry does not appear to extend beyond rather complicated relabelling "improvements". The introduction of an easy to use and understand "Traffic Light" system, that had recently been unilaterally launched by one supermarket company in response to publicity surrounding the obesity pandemic, was roundly condemned out of hand. Could it be that where one goes others would feel obliged to follow? Since the hormone based wonder drug PYY3-36 does not work, marginal improvements could be achieved by a combination of fat tax, subsidies for fruit in schools, increased physical activity, and reduction in size of portions, but does this amount to an effective strategy to meet an overwhelming problem? The need for manufacturers to provide food that does not cause obesity appears to exceed their competence to manage alone, without the intervention, agreement and direction of a newly constituted committee (but not the existing Food Standards Agency?) located at No10 Downing Street, no less.