



Health advocates hit back at opposition to labelling plans

Alexandra Smith
CONSUMER AFFAIRS

HEALTH and consumer groups are warning that shoppers will be misled by a flood of unsubstantiated general health claims on packaged food which make dishonest promises at a time when Australians' diets are already poor.

As revealed by the *Herald* yesterday, a decade-long push for truth in food labelling looks like it may be derailed by the powerful grocery industry, which is pushing for self-regulation of general health claims on packaged food.

Health claims such as the ability of certain milk products to dramatically reduce cholesterol or probiotic juices supporting "your natural immune defences" may be allowed to be sold first and their effectiveness proven later.

It had been expected that general health claims would have to be checked by Food Standards Australia New Zealand before the foods could be sold but the pro-

Threat to truth in labelling of food

The *Herald's* front page yesterday.

posal was opposed by the Australian Food and Grocery Council.

Instead, the food industry wants manufacturers to be allowed to market a product based on their own research.

The executive manager of the Obesity Policy Coalition, Jane Martin, said health claims had huge impacts on consumers' buying decisions and so it was vital that they were substantiated and did not dupe shoppers.

"There is a high level of interest in health claims yet people's diets

are really poor, so it is very important that consumers are not misled because we know these sort of claims can be very influential," Ms Martin said.

"Health claims are powerful so they need to be transparent, verifiable and honest."

Health and consumer groups have been lobbying for a standard for health claims for more than 10 years but the federal parliamentary secretary for health, Catherine King, would not comment on why the process had once again stalled.

Ms King said the ministers agreed to "further consider general level health claims" and had asked the food regulation standing committee to "develop options for consideration" by the end of this month.

"The aim is to develop a system that provides increased confidence for consumers in the validity of claims, a level playing field for industry and an enforceable standard for the jurisdictions," Ms King said in a statement.