



**NUTRITION**

# Labelling 'lite': review aims to sort the healthy wheat from misleading chaff

**The health lobby is pushing for a traffic-light system for food advice, writes Jill Stark.**

IT'S PACKED with the "goodness" of wholegrains, has a tick for fibre and uses only natural colours and flavours. A lush raspberry dipped in yoghurt adorns the box, implying it's nutritious and wholesome.

But this seemingly natural muesli bar is an impostor, according to public health experts. If they have their way such a snack will soon be exposed as a highly processed, sugary indulgence.

Their hopes are pinned on a review of Australian and New Zealand food-labelling laws.

Among measures being considered are a crackdown on descriptions such as "lite" and "natural", and a ban on deceptive health claims, or burying negative information in fine print.

It could mean products such as this Uncle Toby's muesli bar, spruiked as a source of fibre, would also have to carry warnings about its high levels of sugar and saturated fat.

Uncle Toby's couldn't be reached for comment, but it is by no means the only company to use such packaging strategies. With the trend now widespread, the review committee is under pressure to take steps to hold the industry to account.

The inquiry will also look at whether chain restaurants should be forced to show calorie counts next to menu dishes.

Obesity experts say it would help consumers make healthier choices and let them know a crispy Caesar salad bought at McDonald's contains almost as many kilojoules as a Big Mac.

The proposal mirrors new laws under US President Barack Obama's health reforms, imposed

on all food chains with more than 20 outlets.

Symbols such as the Heart Foundation tick will be scrutinised amid claims an abundance of symbols and images on packaging is confusing.

Set up by the Council of Australian Governments, the independent food-labelling committee has received almost 7000 submissions so far and will come to Melbourne this month during its second round of public consultations.

Chairman Neal Blewett, former health minister in the Hawke government, told *The Sunday Age* he planned to "clean up" the labelling system, particularly around deceptive health claims.

He said packaging that showed pictures of a healthy food when the product contained minimal levels of the ingredient misled.

Dr Blewett also hinted at the establishment of a national enforcement agency to ensure industry adheres to labelling legislation. Labelling is now governed by federal agency Food Standards Australia New Zealand, but enforcement for breaches of the code is the responsibility of state and territory food authorities or health departments. Prosecutions are rare.

It means that while manufacturers are not permitted to make direct claims that a product will help prevent, for example, osteoporosis or heart disease, they get away with claims such as "contains calcium for strong bones". With each jurisdiction interpreting the code differently, there is often confusion over whether such slogans constitute a breach.

The definition of words such as "natural" or "healthy" is also unclear and there is a push to ensure the terms comply with set nutritional standards before manufacturers can apply them.

And while the word "light"

**The inquiry will also look at whether chains should**

**show calorie counts.**

can be used only if the ingredient it refers to meets criteria for low fat and sugar content, companies increasingly use the term "lite" to get around the requirement.

"We've got to have some consistency and clarity about the terms used," Dr Blewett said. "The proliferation now of nutrient claims contribute to public confusion rather than public understanding."

The public health lobby points to breakfast cereals, snack bars and juices as the worst offenders when it comes to nutritionally poor products masquerading as healthy fare.

A review last month of 40 popular drinks by children's health lobby group the Parents Jury found some brands of fizzy fruit juices claiming to be 99 per cent fruit contained more sugar and calories than a glass of Coke and lacked the fibre and nutrients found in an actual piece of fruit.

Consumer group Choice, and the Obesity Policy Coalition — comprising the Cancer Council Victoria, VicHealth, Deakin University's World Health Organisation Collaborating Centre for Obesity Prevention, and Diabetes Australia-Vic — want a traffic-light labelling system in which high-fat, sugary foods would be branded red, healthier foods amber and the most nutritious products green.

The coalition's senior policy adviser, Jane Martin, said the system was simple to understand and would help the disadvantaged, who were the biggest consumers of processed food.

"People on low incomes are driven by price so they think they'll get the cheap muesli bar with the strawberries on it because it looks healthy, when really it's just more sugar or palm oil, which is a saturated fat," Ms Martin said. "If you had traffic lights people would know imme-



diately it was high in sugar.”

The food lobby rejects the system, claiming it is too prescriptive. Australian manufacturers have taken heart from a failed push for traffic-light legislation in the European Union, which voted down the proposal in March, with opponents arguing it would give sugar-free Coke a green light but natural apple juice a red.

The British government also bowed to industry pressure last month, introducing a watered-down labelling regime that dropped the traffic light warnings, replacing them with the words “high”, “medium” or “low” alongside nutritional information.

The Australian Food and Grocery Council, the national lobby group for the \$100 billion food, drink and grocery industry, advocates its own daily intake guide, voluntarily introduced in 2006 in what health groups claim was a response to the looming threat of regulation. More than 80 leading brands across more than 2000 products now carry the labels, which list the percentage of recommended daily intake of energy, protein, fat, saturated fat, carbohydrates, sugar, fibre and salt the product represents.

Health groups say it is difficult to understand, being based on

the nutritional requirements of an average-sized man, and on set serving portions. However, Geoffrey Annison, the council’s deputy chief executive, said it was less prescriptive than traffic lights, which could place a red light on cheese that might be high in fat but packed with calcium, an essential nutrient.

The industry’s submission to the review urged the committee not to use labelling as a tool to force products off the market. It also called for strong evidence of a public health and safety risk

### **They get away with claims such as “contains calcium for strong bones”.**

that would be addressed by introducing mandatory labelling.

“If the benefits are very clear, like in the case of allergen labelling, then we quite readily accept the regulations in fact we go beyond that with our own industry voluntary codes,” Dr Annison said.

“Industry does its best to try and present foods in a way that is appealing to consumers and ultimately if the consumer is disappointed by what they finally eat compared with what they saw on the front of the pack they

won’t make a repeat purchase.”

There does seem to be consumer support for traffic-light labels, though. A 2008 Cancer Council study of 800 shoppers found 90 per cent favoured the scheme.

Ms Martin believes the system would encourage manufacturers to reformulate products, making them more nutritious in a bid to avoid red-light labels. A similar effect was achieved when McDonald’s started making a range of healthier meals to get the Heart Foundation tick.

However, Dr Annison said too much information on packaging would increase confusion. The future of labelling was technology that allowed shoppers to scan a barcode in-store with their mobile phone and download extensive product information.

The review, launched last October, is looking at a range of other issues including labels for country of origin, genetically modified foods and nanotechnology.

It will also consider whether health warnings should be placed on alcohol packaging.

A final report is expected by the end of the year.

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# ARE YOU BEING CONNED?

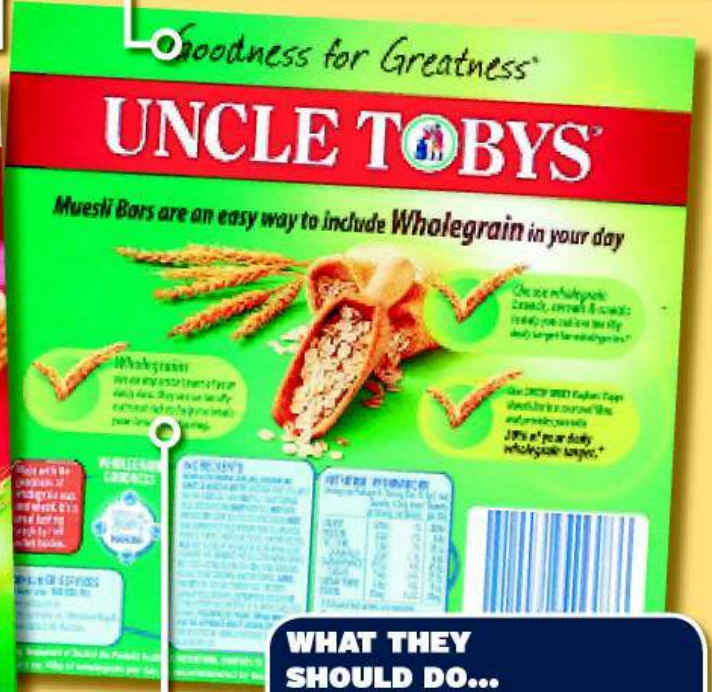
Comments from the Obesity Policy Coalition

The pictures, words and the name of the bar imply that it is full of raspberries, but it only contains 1% raspberry pieces and 0.2% raspberry juice concentrate.

Research shows percentage daily intake labels are not well understood by consumers. Labels provide no interpretation of whether these figures are high, medium or low, and whether the product is healthy overall.

Words like "goodness" imply product is healthy but fine print shows sugar - including its derivatives glucose, invert sugar and sucrose - appears five times in ingredient list.

Research shows sports celebrity endorsements make children think products are healthy and improve sporting performance. Uncle Toby's uses Olympic athletes such as swimmers Grant Hackett and Eamon Sullivan.



No artificial colours & flavours  
Source of fibre

Ticks imply that the product is endorsed as a healthy choice.

These claims and the product name make the bars sound natural, minimally processed and healthy. They actually contain more than 20 ingredients, including preservatives and additives.

Highlighting positive nutritional aspects creates the impression the product is healthy, but the pack doesn't state that the product is also nearly a third sugar (29.9%) and very high in saturated fat (8.3%).

Wholegrains are "naturally nutrient rich to help maintain your family's wellbeing". Terminology suggests healthiness. Plays on consumers' concerns about providing healthy food for their children.

### WHAT THEY SHOULD DO...

<b>MED</b> Fat 16.1g	<b>Traffic lights (per 100 grams)</b>
<b>HIGH</b> Sat. Fat 8.6g	The government should introduce legislation to require the front of all food packages to display consistent 'traffic light' labelling which helps people to make healthier choices.
<b>HIGH</b> Sugar 29.9g	
<b>LOW</b> Salt 35mg	