

FOOD STANDARDS NEWS



The Newsletter of Food Standards Australia New Zealand

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FROM THE
MANAGING
DIRECTOR'S
DESK

Diet and obesity

In many western countries there is growing concern over the issue of obesity. The share of our population who are overweight or obese is rising at an alarming rate. There are increasing public demands for concerted action to address this issue, particularly as it is affecting children and teenagers, not just adults.

Some State governments have already held public forums which have brought together experts and others covering a broad spectrum of interests and expertise.

Expert opinion indicates that the causation is complex – it is not just a diet issue. There are also other important factors such as lack of exercise, lifestyle, and ageing of the population. Nonetheless, diet is clearly one of the most significant factors.

Work undertaken by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has highlighted the importance of the diet in relation to a broad spectrum of health issues. The main diet-related risk factors were identified as obesity, hypertension and high blood cholesterol.

These factors are strongly associated with several forms of cardiovascular disease, stroke, a number of forms of cancer, diabetes, osteoarthritis, disease of the kidneys and gall bladder and back problems. These diseases make up a substantial proportion of the burden of disease and disability of our population.

These considerations have been an important factor in our developing a mandatory nutrition labelling requirement for virtually all classes of packaged food, as an important element of the new *Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code*.

But will the new nutrition information panels make a difference to consumers' choice of food? We don't have sufficient data on Australian and New Zealand consumer behaviour to tell us what difference this will make. However, we do have data from a

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FSANZ and New Zealand Ministry of Health staff re-enact the Treaty of Waitangi at the Maori Cultural Awareness training in Wellington.

Improving consultation with indigenous people

Many of the major public health issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are diet-related. For example, heart disease and diabetes are higher than in the non-Aboriginal community.

FSANZ intends to work with other relevant government agencies and community organisations to ensure a consistent, co-ordinated, holistic approach is adopted in order to successfully target and address food and health issues relevant for indigenous people.

In relation to food standards development, specific strategies suggested for consideration were the use of culturally specific advertising campaigns, establishing a steering committee, identifying possible employment options for indigenous people and the development of cultural awareness by FSANZ staff.

FSANZ has also been developing strategies to improve Maori involvement and consultation in food standards development. As a part of the development and implementation of this strategy, a Maori Reference Group (MRG) has been formed (see FSN 40).

Over the past 12 months, eight senior FSANZ staff members have attended Maori Cultural Awareness training run by the New Zealand Ministry of Health. The course is held on a local Marae (meeting house) in Wellington and is facilitated by Amster Reedy, a Maori held in high esteem by both Maori and Pakeha (non-Maori).

The aim of this two-day course is to increase awareness and acceptance of the differences between Mori and non-Mori.

FSANZ staff gained a greater understanding of Maori philosophy, spirituality, current social issues and a clearer meaning of bi-culturalism. Staff also learned a little te Reo Maori (language) and increased their knowledge of the significance and relevance of the Treaty of Waitangi.

In September, FSANZ held a small consultation workshop in Melbourne to discuss key issues in relation to food and food regulation facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban environments. This complemented larger consultations in the Northern Territory last year.

Shopper's guide launched to help consumers buy healthy food

FSANZ launched the *Official Shopper's Guide to Food Additives and Labels* in September to assist shoppers to understand the new food labels.

Nearly all packaged food manufactured on or after 20 December 2002 must meet the new labelling requirements of the *Food Standards Code*, including nutrition information panels, percentage of main ingredient, new date markings and full disclosure of major allergens.

Research by FSANZ has found that, while over 90% of consumers welcome these changes, approximately 80% feel they could not fully understand the new labels.

Diet related risk factors, including high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, obesity (in both adults and children) and Type 2 diabetes, account for 13% of Australia and New Zealand's burden of disease. Experience in the United States shows that, when mandatory nutrition labelling was introduced there, a significant proportion of consumers began to make healthier food choices.

However these health advantages will not be achieved if consumers don't have enough information on how to interpret these new labels, particularly nutrition information panels. This is why FSANZ has developed the *Official Shopper's Guide to Food Additives and Labels*.

When launching the guide, one of Australia's leading nutritionists and food commentators, Ms Catherine Saxelby, said that food labels were the one link between the food manufacturer and the consumer.

'There is a wealth of information on food labels but this information can often be confusing for consumers. This shopper's guide unravels this information as it can help consumers interpret nutrition information panels to choose healthier foods, for example by knowing what types of fats to avoid or how much salt should be consumed.

'There has been a lot of talk about fighting obesity and other diet-related diseases recently. Buying this book and taking it shopping with you could be the first practical step you make for better health for you and your family,' Ms Saxelby concluded.

The Shopper's Guide is published by Murdoch Books and will be sold at a recommended retail price of \$4.95 in Australia through bookshops and variety stores. The book can be ordered from Murdoch Books' customer service line at 02 4352 7000 or fax: 02 4352 7026 or by e-mail to vnewman@mm.com.au or by contacting Food Standards Australia New Zealand by email info@foodstandards.gov.au or phone 02 6271 2241.

New recall protocol for the food industry

FSANZ has recently revised its Food Industry Recall Protocol in order to assist industry to comply with the requirements of the Food Safety Standard 3.2.2. This standard requires food businesses engaged in the wholesale supply, manufacture or importation of food to have a written recall procedure in place that ensures the effective recall of unsafe food.

The new Protocol sets out, in a stepwise process, the fundamentals of developing a recall plan and conducting a recall. It also explains the roles and responsibilities of businesses and government when a recall is necessary.

The Protocol also provides a template with an example of a written recall plan for a food manufacturing business. This may be adapted by food businesses in preparing their own written plans.

Copies of the new *Food Industry Recall Protocol*, 5th Edition September 2002, can be obtained directly from FSANZ by phone 02 6271 2222, fax 02 6271 2278 or from the FSANZ website at www.foodstandards.gov.au.

« From the Managing Director cont.

small study conducted in the United States ten years ago when mandatory nutrition information panels were introduced there. This showed that in relation to the food examined, there was a shift of 4% to 5.7% in the direction of healthier choice.

This may not seem much. However, if the AIHW figures are applied to this, it still translates to a reduction of 320 to 460 deaths in Australia and New Zealand each year – well worth achieving.

With the growing concern of our community today about a healthier diet for ourselves and our families, we might expect a stronger response from consumers.

Achieving this will be dependent upon two major conditions – that foods consistently carry reliable information about their nutritional composition; and that consumers are given more information on how to make smart, healthy food choices using the information on labels.

Ensuring that food labels tell the truth will be dependent upon all businesses approaching this responsibility in a conscientious way. It will also be dependent upon effective enforcement.

It will be rather more difficult to give consumers the knowledge to make healthier decisions for themselves about which foods to choose. Our schools are very well placed to contribute to this. The healthy eating message is not just about avoiding fatal and disabling conditions later in life – it's also about looking better, feeling better and performing better – things that most people, including children and teenagers, want to achieve.

If we can get knowledge and understanding of these things across to our kids at school, they will help to relay the messages also to parents across the breakfast table.

The Managing Director position

The legislation which converted the Australia New Zealand Food Authority (ANZFA) to Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ)

provided for all Board members to relinquish their positions to allow a new Board to be established. For non-executive directors, this occurred on 30 June 2002. For the Chief Executive/Managing Director, it will occur on 31 December.

I have been giving a lot of thought to whether to put up my hand for a further term. I have now been in this position for approaching five years – the longest I have spent in any position in my career. It has been a very satisfying challenge and I have enjoyed working with so many talented and committed people – both inside and outside my organisation. However, I have long held the view that senior executives should not remain for too long in their job and have accordingly decided not to seek a further term.

The Chairman and I have agreed, however, that if it takes longer than the end of this year to appoint a successor, I will remain on to ensure a smooth transition.

Ian Lindenmayer
Managing Director

Setting standards for the seafood industry

FSANZ has recently assumed responsibility for the development of primary production and processing standards that will be mandatory in Australia. The first such standard to be developed under the new regulatory framework will be for the seafood sector.

The seafood standard will focus on food safety, be outcome-based, consistent with the existing standards within the *Food Standards Code* and harmonise, as far as possible, with international and national approaches to regulating the safety of seafood.

In developing these standards, FSANZ is required to establish a Standards Development Committee (SDC) that includes appropriate expertise and brings informed views from industry, government, research and consumers. The role of the SDC is to provide advice and expertise to FSANZ as a part of the standard development process.

FSANZ publicly sought nominations to the seafood SDC in August 2002, and also invited nominations from government through the Food Regulation Standing Committee. The FSANZ Board has subsequently appointed the following people to the seafood SDC:

- Industry:** Richard Stevens, Colin Dyke, Bryan Skepper, Ted Loveday, Mark Gooley, Martin Perkins, Phillip Walsh
- Consumers:** Frank Peters, Rebecca Smith
- Government:** Barry Shay, Margaret Darton, Phil Pond, Don Nichols, Richard Souness, Geoff Raven, Craig Midgley, John McCartie, Kerry Bell
- FSANZ:** Greg Roche (Chair), Luba Tomaska

The SDC is expected to establish a number of working groups to address specific technical and scientific issues that will need to be considered throughout the standard development process.

The seafood standard will be developed through established FSANZ processes, with the first step being the development of an issues paper for consideration and comment. In December 2002, the FSANZ Board is expected to consider the raising of Proposal documentation, incorporating the issues, to be circulated for public comment.

In developing the seafood standard, FSANZ will take into consideration existing standards, such as the recently completed voluntary industry standard for seafood developed by Seafood Services Australia and the NSW government standard for seafood.



Members of the Seafood Standards Development Committee attended an inaugural meeting in Canberra in October.

Endosulfan MRLs under investigation

FSANZ has commenced an examination of a number of maximum residue limits for the insecticide endosulfan in the *Food Standards Code*.

This follows a review of the agricultural use of the chemical by the National Registration Authority for Veterinary and Agricultural Chemicals (NRA). The NRA found that the use of endosulfan on a number of leafy vegetables 'may result in an occasional vegetable that has endosulfan residues exceeding the safety threshold'.

The NRA has stopped the use of endosulfan on the vegetables in question.

The Australian Total Diet Survey conducted by FSANZ, periodically, on supermarket foods shows full compliance with the safety limits. Any identified residues of endosulfan are therefore well below the internationally accepted health limits. Moreover, endosulfan residues have been falling for some years.

Because of the cautionary approach of the NRA and FSANZ towards setting maximum residue limits, the NRA's finding that the safety threshold was at the risk of being breached on occasions, while of concern, does not pose a public health risk.

If a decision were to be taken to remove from the *Food Standards Code* the MRLs for endosulfan for the vegetables concerned, it would thereafter be illegal for anyone to sell those vegetables with any trace of the insecticide, however small.

Any change to the Code that might be decided upon would take effect as soon as it was gazetted. MRLs in the Code apply to Australia only.

Australia's MRL-setting processes

The National Registration Authority for Agricultural and Veterinary Chemicals (NRA) and Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) each set MRLs for their respective purposes. Where MRLs are based solely on Australian uses, the MRLs set by the two agencies should be the same.

However, discrepancies continue to exist between these MRLs. The principal cause of these discrepancies is the sequential nature of NRA and FSANZ statutory processes – that is, NRA sets a level for use in agriculture and applies to FSANZ for a corresponding provision to be included in the *Food Standards Code*.

While NRA and FSANZ have aligned their processes as far as they can within the differing arrangements imposed by their respective Acts, food can be produced containing residues of registered chemicals before corresponding MRLs are established in the *Food Standards Code*.

Over recent months, a Commonwealth Inter-Agency Committee has considered this issue and a paper entitled *A Proposal to Co-ordinate Processes for Setting Maximum Residue Limits* was recently distributed to stakeholders for comment. This paper seeks to identify stakeholder concerns and key issues in MRL setting, and proposes options for the amendment of the current processes for setting domestic MRLs.

The aim is to put in place an optimal system for the setting of MRLs in Australia. However, it should be recognised that all the identified options, other than maintaining the *status quo*, require the amendment of the FSANZ and/or the NRA legislation and, if agreed upon, would take some time to implement.

A half-day workshop was also conducted on 23 September 2002 by the agencies involved in the Committee to explain Australia's current MRL setting process to stakeholders.

Chief Scientist Dr Marion Healy looks at the role of MSG in food

While the majority of us can eat a wide range of foods without experiencing any adverse effects, a small number of individuals experience an adverse reaction in response to eating certain foods or substances in food.

These reactions are generally classed as hypersensitive reactions and comprise two major categories – food allergies and food intolerances. Food allergies are mediated via the immune system while food intolerances are mediated through non-immune mechanisms.

Food intolerances can be caused by metabolic disorders (eg lactose intolerance), although in some cases the mechanism is not known, and the intolerance is termed an idiosyncratic reaction. One substance reported to cause idiosyncratic reactions is mono sodium glutamate (MSG).

The types of symptoms reported in response to MSG vary, but can include headache, numbness/tingling, flushing, muscle tightness, and generalised weakness. These reactions, while unpleasant, tend to be transient and do not produce any long-lasting effects. Some studies have estimated that this complex of symptoms may occur in about 1% of the population following consumption of a meal, although it is not clear what proportion of these reported reactions are directly attributable to MSG.

MSG is the sodium salt of one of the most abundant amino acids found in nature: L-glutamic acid. Glutamic acid exists both as free glutamate and in protein. Glutamate is synthesised by the body and plays an essential role in human metabolism.

Glutamate occurs naturally in virtually all foods, including meat, fish, poultry, breast milk and vegetables. In general, protein-rich foods -

such as breast milk, and meat - contain large amounts of bound glutamate, whereas vegetables and fruits (especially peas, tomatoes, and potatoes) and mushrooms tend to contain high levels of free glutamate. Some processed foods, such as fermented and hydrolysed protein products (eg. soy sauce, vegemite), can also contain large amounts of free glutamate.

It is the free glutamate in foods, such as cheese and tomato, which contributes to their flavour enhancing effects when used in cooking.

In addition, MSG is often added deliberately to food during processing or preparation because of its flavour enhancing effects. Various processed and prepared foods, such as traditional seasonings, stocks, sauces, canned soups, can therefore contain significant levels of free glutamate, both from natural sources and from added MSG.

Several recent reviews of the scientific evidence have confirmed that MSG is safe for the general population at the levels typically found in food. While a small percentage of the population may experience a mild hypersensitivity-type reaction when large amounts of MSG are consumed in a single meal, MSG does not appear to be a significant trigger of more serious allergic (immune system mediated) reactions or asthmatic attacks.

MSG is regulated as a food additive in the joint *Food Standards Code*, and therefore must be identified in the ingredient list of packaged foods. The presence of MSG can be declared by name or as a "flavour enhancer" followed by the food additive code number. Glutamates are identified by the food additive code numbers 621 to 625 inclusive, with MSG designated as 621.

What is FSANZ?

Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) protects the health and safety of the people in Australia and New Zealand by maintaining a safe food supply.

We are a bi-national independent statutory authority that develops food standards for composition, labelling and contaminants, including microbiological limits, that apply to all foods produced or imported for sale in Australia and New Zealand.

In Australia, Food Standards Australia New Zealand develops food standards to cover the whole of the food supply chain – from paddock to plate – for both the food manufacturing industry and primary producers.

Food Standards Australia New Zealand works in partnership with Australia's Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and the New Zealand Government. We also seek to engage industry, consumers and public health professionals in our work.

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How to calculate nutrition information panels

The Nutrition Panel Calculator (NPC) is a web-based, online nutrition-labelling tool, developed by FSANZ to help food businesses to meet the requirements of the new *Food Standards Code*.

You can access it, free of charge, via the FSANZ website (www.foodstandards.gov.au) by following the links presented on the FSANZ homepage.

A number of alternative options are available to manufacturers to assist with the preparation of nutrition information panels. Whatever approach your company takes, you should be aware of the advantages and limitations of each.

Several companies are producing commercial nutrition labelling packages along the lines of the NPC, many with added features such as data storage and retrieval. These commercial packages also tend to use FSANZ's *AUSNUT Special Edition* database. These companies publicise their services and food businesses wishing to use them should contact them direct to discuss their particular requirements and budget.

Alternatively, food manufacturers can have their products analysed by laboratories. FSANZ recommends that the chosen

laboratory be one that is accredited by either the National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) or the International Accreditation New Zealand (IANZ).

The advantage of laboratory analysis of specific products is that this will generally provide a more accurate reflection of the actual nutrient composition, rather than relying on average values. However, to get the most representative results possible, it is important to develop a suitable sampling protocol. It is also important to bear in mind that the accuracy of the results may still vary depending on the analytical methods used and the complexity of the product.

For those who are happy to calculate their nutrition information panels manually, the User Guide to Standard 1.2.8 – Nutrition Information Requirements (available via the FSANZ website) includes several appendices giving detailed, step-by-step instructions on how to do so. This can become a tedious option, depending on the number of ingredients in the food, and some skill is required to avoid errors in performing the manual calculations.

Further details on the nutrition panel calculator can be found in a fact sheet on the FSANZ website.