

CMA's Presentation to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health

Nutrition Labelling

Presented by:

Jeffrey Turnbull, MD, FRCPC
President

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Check against delivery

A healthy population and a vibrant medical profession
Une population en santé et une profession médicale
dynamique

The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) is the national voice of Canadian physicians. Founded in 1867, CMA's mission is to serve and unite the physicians of Canada and be the national advocate, in partnership with the people of Canada, for the highest standards of health and health care.

On behalf of its more than 74,000 members and the Canadian public, CMA performs a wide variety of functions. Key functions include advocating for health promotion and disease/injury prevention policies and strategies, advocating for access to quality health care, facilitating change within the medical profession, and providing leadership and guidance to physicians to help them influence, manage and adapt to changes in health care delivery.

The CMA is a voluntary professional organization representing the majority of Canada's physicians and comprising 12 provincial and territorial divisions and 51 national medical organizations.



Thank you very much for inviting the Canadian Medical Association back to this committee as you continue your study on healthy living.

A few weeks ago my colleague Dr. Doig was here to talk about the health consequences of poor nutrition and lack of physical activity and the policies CMA has advocated to promote healthy living.

Today I would like to expand upon nutrition labelling and health claims on foods, and on the labelling of foods regulated as natural health products.

Nutrition facts tables can be an important source of information, but many Canadians have difficulty interpreting them. A 2009 Health Canada review of research on nutrition labelling indicated that those with little nutrition knowledge have difficulty using the tables and are unable to relate the information they contain to their own dietary needs.

There has been an increase in the use of health claims on the front of packaging expressed as slogans or logos such as “healthy choice,” as well as in disease reduction and nutrient content claims.

Studies have shown that foods carrying health-related claims are seen by consumers as healthier choices. But the myriad of different claims can be confusing and may, in fact, draw attention away from the less healthy characteristics of a food, or oversimplify complex nutritional messages.

We believe a standard consistent “at a glance” approach to front-of-package food labelling could reduce confusion and help consumers make informed dietary choices.

The “traffic light” front-of-pack labelling currently in voluntary use in the UK is an example. The front-of-pack labels on composite processed foods use green, amber and red to indicate low, medium or high levels of the nutrients most strongly associated with diet-related health risks: fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt. Also included is calorie count per serving and percentage daily amount information.

Research in the UK has shown that consumers generally understand these labels. Shoppers are most likely to use them when buying a product for the first time; to compare different products; when shopping for children; when trying to control intake of certain ingredients such as fat or salt, for health reasons; or when trying to lose weight.

Not surprisingly, research in the UK and Canada also shows that those most likely to read nutrition labels are those who are already interested in healthy eating.

For this reason, labelling policy must be embedded in a broader nutrition policy that uses multiple instruments to foster education and interest in healthy eating, and helps ensure that Canadians have healthy food choices by, for example, regulating amounts of salt in processed food.

In addition, physicians have become quite concerned about a recent tendency toward regulating 'fortified foods' as Natural Health Products.

The Food and Drugs Act effectively prevents products classified as foods from being marketed as having medicinal benefits unless there is compelling scientific evidence that the claims are true and the products are safe. The same strong legislation does not apply to Natural Health Products (NHPs), which are regulated under a different act.

This is a concern because a trend is emerging whereby manufacturers of products normally sold as foods fortify their products with approved natural health products such as vitamins or minerals. Examples of these are energy drinks and vitamin-enhanced juice, power bars, gums and candy.

The manufacturer can then request federal approval to market the product as a 'health product in food format.' If approved, food labelling requirements no longer apply and health claims that would not be allowed under the Food and Drugs Act can be made.

Without proper nutrition labelling, it is difficult, if not impossible, for consumers to make informed food choices. This can be particularly troubling for those with special diets or health concerns. Further, those misled by dubious health claims might be consuming empty calories or high amounts of fat or sodium, with no corresponding benefit. The result is that the health of Canadians may be compromised.

The CMA has called on Health Canada to require compelling evidence of health benefits before changing a product's regulatory status from food to natural health product, and nutrition labelling for all foods regulated as a natural health product.

Faced with an array of products and health claims, and a barrage of advertising extolling their benefits, Canadians can find it challenging to make healthier food choices.

To find our way through to the right choice, we need good nutritional information, and the ability to access and understand this information.

Governments and health care providers share a responsibility to help Canadians make choices that will help them achieve and maintain good health. Canada's doctors are partners in healthy living and are ready to work with governments and others toward a healthy population.

I welcome your questions.