

# Letter to the Editor

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*Nutrition labelling, environment, sustainability*

## **Drowning in labels**

Madam

It was about time that someone dared to ‘bell the cat’ regarding the whole issue of nutrition labelling and its effect or lack thereof, as Lachat and Tseng did in their recent editorial<sup>(1)</sup>. Such contributions are welcome particularly at a time where it seems that all the legislation is going towards a regulation of the already very complex contents of food labels.

Nutrition labelling is correctly a hot topic within public health nutrition and has been an area of debate for many years. From the perspective of consumers’ rights and their possibility of making informed choices, it could be argued that both the research community as well as policy makers agree that there has been – and to some extent there still exists – a need to provide consumers with all the information necessary for them to make the best food choices.

If one looks at it under the light of evidence, and common sense, as Lachat and Tseng did<sup>(1)</sup>, the question of whether it is worth investing effort and public funds in regulating and enforcing something that at the end of the day appears to have only limited effect is, to say the least, worrisome. If the goal is to provide tools for a better informed choice, then probably a synergy of actions will be needed and the overall effect will determine whether a group of policy interventions is more or less effective<sup>(2)</sup> in achieving the desired behavioural change at population level.

We believe there is a need to challenge the old paradigm that the only one responsible for his or her fate is the individual, as if he or she lived in a perfect environment, isolated from interactions with the world outside. Particularly in the case of obesity, social support has proved to be one of the key elements in sustainable weight loss<sup>(3)</sup>. It is therefore time to argue in favour of ‘corporate social responsibility’ for nutrition, where actors in society, including both public and private sectors, learn from each other<sup>(4)</sup> and join together with the individual in order to make the healthier or the sustainable choice easier.

Maybe it is also time to shift the Public Health Nutrition paradigm towards a more comprehensive one, where the objective is to have the healthy and sustainable choice become the default for the consumer. Would it be too much to ask the world to be a place where the default food option is healthy, sustainable and tasty?

Then it will be possible to turn our attention in more creative and effective ways to other aspects of food consumption, such as its environmental impact. Food production and consumption have a large impact on climate

change by contributing substantially to greenhouse gas emission<sup>(5–7)</sup>. To what extent do we need to inform consumers about the environmental impact of their food consumption through labelling with e.g. foodprints? Wouldn’t it be more effective to regulate food production systems so that environmentally sound food production and consumption are the default, hence removing the weight of ‘responsibility’ from the consumer?

Interest in more integrated thinking about nutritional and climate impacts of food behaviour seems to be increasing both within academia and policy making<sup>(8,9)</sup>, with a growing number of research papers dealing with the challenges related to the field<sup>(10–12)</sup>. We, as researchers within behavioural nutrition as well as food waste, understand the importance of both healthy nutrition and environmental impacts when it comes to consumer behaviour. Likewise, we accept and preach the importance of monitored nutrition labelling as a tool to inform consumers about healthy eating. However, with an increase in interest among consumers in ‘sustainable eating’ and a growing number of unmonitored labels on products claiming environmental friendliness, a need to call out is necessary. Is the amount of labels starting to confuse the consumer rather than inform? And how reliable are sustainability labels on food products?

We are facing a challenge and a need for better data and methods to assess the climate impact associated with food production and consumption<sup>(13)</sup>. We foresee the need for collective gathering of data on the climate impact of food production and consumption so that we can discuss its potential as well as its drawbacks. We need to look into existing food labels on climate impact and understand their influence on consumer behaviour. Well, we pretty much need an understanding of food labels across all aspects, as the March 2013 issue of *Public Health Nutrition* helps emphasise.

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