



Counting Carbs

Glycemic Index labelling is long overdue in Canada

There's a lot of talk these days about the Glycemic Index (GI). There are several best-selling books extolling its virtues, it's widely used in many countries, and it's now strongly endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the American and U.K. Diabetes Associations, with hundreds of new products adopting the symbol every year. The U.S., the U.K., Australia and New Zealand permit and even promote GI labelling, and major food companies around the world now include this useful information on their labels. The Canadian Diabetes Association is a particularly strong supporter. Why is it then that here in Canada, where the concept was developed by Toronto doctors David Jenkins and Thomas Wolever, it is apparently illegal to make any reference to GI on a food label or in any food advertising?

The GI ranks carbohydrate-rich foods according to how fast and how high they raise blood glucose levels. A GI of 55 or less ranks as low, 56 to 69 is medium, and 70 or more is high. There is strong scientific evidence that providing diabetics with GI information can help them manage their condition. This has prompted the Canadian Diabetes Association to give the following advice to physicians who are counselling diabetic patients: "Within the same food category, consume low-Glycemic Index foods in place of high-Glycemic Index foods." The American Diabetes Association reviewed a major study using randomized controlled trials that examined the efficacy of the GI and concluded that: "This technique can provide additional benefit over that observed when total carbohydrate is considered alone." And for the general consumer, the WHO recommends "that in making food choices, the Glycemic Index be used as a useful indicator on the impact of foods on the integrated response of blood glucose."

Why then would Canada make it illegal to refer to GI on a food label or in advertisements? The federal government's stated reason is set out in a recent Information Letter: "In the absence of a defined method for determining the glycemic index of each food, statements like 'Low Glycemic Index,' 'Non Glycemic' and 'Glycemic Index = 10' are not acceptable." This is a strange position in light of the fact that the WHO/FAO study "Carbohydrates in Human Nutrition Report" (FAO Food and Nutrition Paper #66, Rome, April

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14, 1997) includes a clear outline of the recommended protocol to be used for GI measurement, the same methodology used in Canada and in numerous other commercial, academic and clinical laboratories worldwide. The method has been thoroughly articulated in the recent paper "Glycemic Index Methodology" by Brouns et al., (*Nutrition Research Review*, 2005, pp. 145 - 171).

Some have suggested that the government has another reason to deny us this information. Like its reasoning in the low-carb edict, perhaps the government thinks that the number may mislead us? Can Americans be trusted with this informa-

tion but not Canadians?

So is there nothing we can do? Do we just accept that this is one more example of government denying us useful information for food choices because it knows what's best for us? Maybe not. While a more thorough legal analysis is necessary, it's not clear that the CFIA has the authority to issue its edict. A GI number is not a nutrient content claim, and it's hard to see how a mere number is likely to mislead consumers. The number alone does not purport to treat, cure or prevent a major disease. What, then, is the legal authority for the government's position? What section of the Food and Drugs Act or Food and Drug Regulations is the government relying on to deny Canadians access to voluntary GI food labelling?

There are strong public health and economic reasons for the federal government to change its policy. As Dr. Wolever has recently stated: "Canada's economy relies on its strong agricultural base. The Glycemic Index is a scientifically based differentiator for carbohydrate sources, such as legumes, pulses and whole grains. Yet regulators in the very nation that was the birthplace of the original Glycemic Index concept almost 25 years ago are behind other global leaders in this area of nutritional innovation, understanding and commercialization. By delaying in making GI information available to Canadians, Health Canada regulators forgo the significant opportunities to improve public health and well-being. GI's time in Canada is long overdue."

Ronald L. Doering, BA, LL.B, MA, LL.D, practises food law in the Ottawa offices of Gowling Lafleur Henderson LLP. He can be reached at: ronald.doering@gowlings.com