



Food Fortification — still looking for the sweet spot



Canada has one of the most restrictive discretionary food fortification laws in the western world. Health Canada officials spent the last 15 years trying to develop a comprehensive new policy to allow food companies greater scope for adding vitamins and minerals to their food products, but last year the Health minister stopped the proposed new policy from going ahead, primarily because of an intense lobby effort by Canadian dietitians who were concerned that the proposed new rules would allow food companies to fortify “junk food.”

This is a good example of what policy theorists call “harsh policy space.” On the one hand, the food industry sees the business and health advantages of enhancing the nutritional intake of their consumers, without any food safety concerns because fortification levels would be strictly regulated. For food companies anxious to sell more nutritious products, this is a win-win.

At the same time, all provincial governments are terrified by the rapid increase in healthcare costs caused in part by bad eating by Canadians. Moreover, it is the publicly funded healthcare system that is burdened with the serious increase in the cost of drugs to combat many diet-related diseases. Provincial governments want more of us to go to our kitchen cupboards, not our medicine cabinets, to deal with problems such as high cholesterol. Various mandatory fortification rules, such as the addition of folates to bakery products, have demonstrated significant health benefits.

On the other hand, dietitians and some physicians are adamantly opposed to discretionary fortification, arguing that consumers will end up eating more junk food in the belief that fortified junk food is a healthy food choice. This position seems to get strong support from a study released recently by University of Toronto researchers Sacco and Tarasuk that was published in the latest *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. Using the 2004 Canadian Community Health Survey data, the authors found an inverse relationship between consumption of fortified foods and the number of servings of foods such as fruit and vegetables, dairy products and meat. Their data raised particular concerns relating to younger age groups.

The authors also noted that there have been very few studies looking at the effect of discretionary fortification on food selection and dietary patterns. They concluded that Health Canada’s proposed policy is “at odds with national dietary recommendations,” and that before we change the rules “it is important that we understand the broader public health implications of discretionary fortification policies on food consumption patterns, particularly in the context of a growing prevalence of obesity.”

I’m told that these conflicting positions also exist within the department, so it’s not surprising that we have continuing policy drift. The inability to develop a new fortification policy also has real implications for another significant regulatory issue. It was the ongoing failure to modernize the food fortification policy — and Canada’s more restrictive health claims policy — that drove many food companies to dress up their food products as natural health products (NHPs), which are not subject to food fortification laws. That’s how we got energy drinks or vitamin-enriched waters being sold as NHPs. The currently confusing “case-by-case” non-policy for food-like NHPs must be clarified, but it cannot be until there is clarification of the food fortification rules.

The root of the harsh policy space is the difficulty in defining “junk food.” From a nutritional science point of view, why would it be acceptable to fortify a nutrition bar but not a chocolate bar, an energy drink but not a soft drink, bread but not a cookie? And harsh policy space makes for difficult politics. Without what policy theorists call a sweet spot — a place that satisfies most interests — the best political option is to do nothing. Don’t count on new food fortification regulations any time soon. ■

Ronald L. Doering, B.A., LL.B., MA, LL.D., is a past president of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. He practices food law in the Ottawa offices of Gowling Lafleur Henderson LLP. Contact him at Ronald.doering@gowlings.com