

Hold the Salt - Part II

Is salt becoming the next trans fat?



While there is always some scientific uncertainty in matters of regulatory science, in last month's article we saw that there is now a strong scientific consensus that Canadians on average are consuming more than double the recommended daily

intake of sodium (1,500 mg), and that there is strong evidence that this overconsumption has very negative effects on our health and on the cost of our health-care system. We also saw that Health Canada's Sodium Working Group has completed its development of policy options and that in its report to government recommended a voluntary approach because mandatory regulation would be "nightmarish, costly and complex" because it is so ubiquitous in our diet.

Health Canada has established a daily reference value of 2,400 mg and has set a target for 2016 of 2,300 mg (roughly one teaspoon). Without mandatory regulation, is it really realistic to think that Canadians will reduce their intake by 30 per cent within six years?

Actually, yes, and we already have an interesting precedent: trans fats. In spite of all the talk about regulations, Canada still has no mandatory regulatory regime for trans fats, and yet in a few short years Canadians are eating far less of it. In cases like this, the market is a much more efficient and efficacious tool than regulations.

There are several parallels. Just as in trans fats, the main source of our sodium is processed food (75 per cent). Most processed food is manufactured by large food companies that compete in a tight market. As in the case of trans fats, given enough time to adjust, these companies will see a

market advantage and find a way to reformulate to offer low-sodium products.

Again, like trans fats, a voluntary approach that works with market incentives rather than trying to regulate conduct avoids many problems that come with regulation, such as uneven enforcement and various trade issues. Seeing the commercial opportunity, companies will move as quickly as possible to beat their competitors to market.

This is already happening. In 2005, Campbell's offered Canadians 24 low-sodium products; by 2009, they had more than 100 product choices for consumers. We've all seen their ubiquitous television ads. And Dempster's offers several low-sodium breads as part of its popular Healthy Way ProCardio Recipe line.

As consumers increasingly demand low-salt products, the food industry will respond.

Fortunately, we also have a good regulatory base to allow companies to only make claims that are not misleading. We have clear rules about standards that are necessary in order to make low-sodium claims

and to qualify for the diet-related health claim that "foods low in sodium may reduce the risk of high blood pressure, a risk factor for stroke and heart disease."

Health Canada has already said that it intends to monitor and report progress. This should allow for "public shaming" if a whole sector refuses to improve.

As consumers increasingly demand low-salt products, the food industry will respond. As in the case of trans fats, the market will drive change faster than cumbersome regulations. ■

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