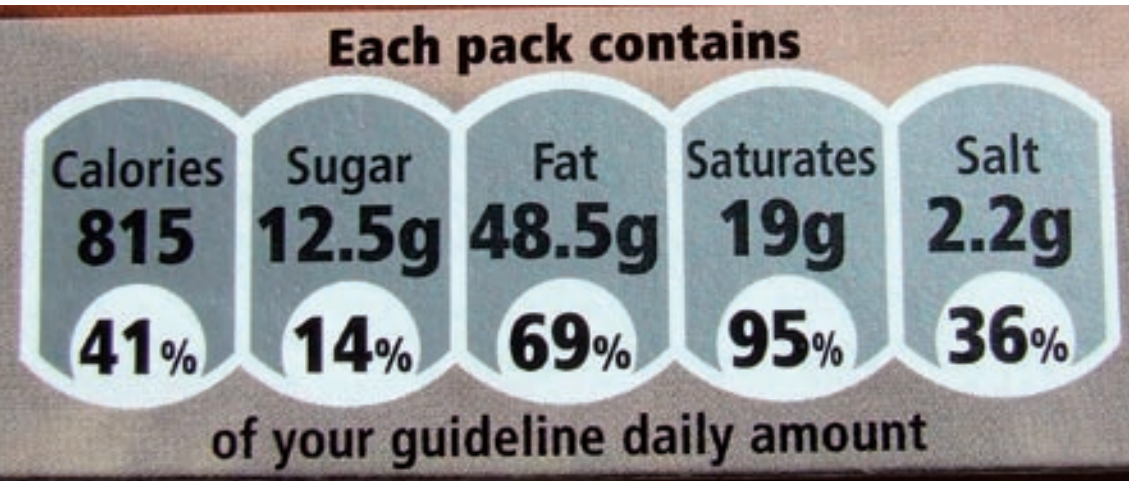




Has the EC jumped the gun on new labelling rules?



proposal is even more unpopular with health campaigners, few of whom support the GDA scheme, which they consider too complicated for consumers to use for making healthy food choices. Indeed the UK Faculty of Public Health called the proposal “a potential disaster for the health of European consumers.”

The need for nutrition labelling is driven by a growing awareness that the food people eat has a profound effect on their health, and by the supposition that

giving consumers information will help them to make healthier choices. All well and good, but I wonder if enough is known about the effect of labelling on consumer behaviour for anyone to decide on the best way to supply nutrition information. After all, in the UK, even the big retailers cannot agree on the best scheme, with some opting for the GDA label and others for the traffic light scheme.

I was somewhat concerned to discover the following sentence in the CIAA press release on the new proposal – “We understand that the European Commission does not have sufficient data to back one particular scheme and therefore leaves room for voluntary national schemes to co-exist.” If that is so, then would it not be a good idea to do the research, get the data, and then produce a proposal on the basis of the findings? For example, the UK Food Standards Agency is currently funding a research project on this very topic. Couldn't this proposal have waited until the results of this research are available? I recognise that the existing proposal has a long way to go before it becomes law, but I can't help thinking that its progress might be smoother if it were founded on hard facts rather than opinion, however well informed.

In 2006, the European Commission held a consultation on the future of labelling in the EU. The results came out at the end of that year and most of the responses were concerned with food labelling. Many of the comments related to the thorny question of how best to present nutrition information on the label. The consultation showed a pretty clear divergence of opinion between industry on the one hand and public health campaigners on the other. Industry favoured voluntary guidelines, while everyone else thought that mandatory nutrition labelling was essential. Now, just over a year later, we learn that the Commission has adopted a proposal to “make food labels clearer and more relevant to the needs of EU consumers.” At the time of writing, the proposals have yet to be published in full, but Commissioner Kyprianou has announced the main points in a press release.

The key component in the proposal is a requirement that information about the amount of six nutrient factors – energy, fat, saturated fat, carbohydrates, sugar and salt – in 100 grams or a single portion of the product must be clearly displayed on the front of the pack, along with the proportion of the Recommended (or Guideline) Daily

Allowance. This is popularly known in the food industry as the GDA labelling scheme. The point of this is to ensure that “EU citizens are empowered to make balanced dietary choices.” Nevertheless, the proposal also leaves room for individual Member States to introduce their own national nutrition labelling schemes, as long as they don't conflict with EU rules.

This slightly woolly proposal seems unlikely to satisfy many of the respondents to the original consultation, although GDA-supporting UK trade association the Food and Drink Federation pronounced itself “delighted” with the proposal. This view is unlikely to be shared by the UK regulator, the Food Standards Agency, which has been championing the rival ‘traffic light’ colour coded nutrition labelling scheme.

Elsewhere, “voice of the European food and drink industry” the CIAA, commented that the “Commission proposal tries to turn the back-of-pack into the front-of-pack by making six elements mandatory.” The CIAA also pointed out that multiple national schemes on top of EU rules could affect the Single Market if food exporters have to use different labelling for each country to which they export. The