



***United Nations Food Trade Body, hosted by Canada, to set guidelines for front-of-pack nutrition labels and explore alcohol warnings as Health Canada explores nutrition labelling options at home***

**October 18, 2017 (ASUNCION, PARAGUAY):** Bill Jeffery, LLB, of the Ottawa-based Centre for Health Science and Law and head delegate for the International Association of Consumer Food Organizations (IACFO) made the following statement from Paraguay:

*A U.N. body decided this afternoon to begin negotiations on global guidelines for front-of-pack nutrition labelling. In recent years, consumer-friendly traffic light nutrition labelling used in the United Kingdom and a stop sign system in Chile have been challenged by the United States, Italian, and former Canadian governments using techniques that resemble tobacco industry efforts to undermine cigarette package labelling reforms in Uruguay and Australia.*

*The governments of New Zealand and Costa Rica, and IACFO—which is officially recognized by the U.N. Codex Committee on Food Labelling (CCFL)—formally proposed the negotiations in the spring of 2016, which led to 18 months of preparatory work by 45 governments, IACFO, and 13 food industry associations. The Codex Committee, which has been chaired and hosted by the government of Canada since the 1960s, sets standards that are recognized as authoritative for resolving trade disputes by the World Trade Organization. Its standards also apply to foods sold within national borders. Though CCFL negotiations are usually held in Ottawa or other Canadian cities, this week’s session was held in Asuncion, Paraguay. The Committee also acceded to a request from the World Health Organization, one of its parent organizations, to explore alcohol warning labels in consideration of the fact that 1 in 17 deaths, globally, is caused by excess alcohol consumption, even though half of adults worldwide drink rarely or abstain. That effort will be led by the Russian Federation, India, Ghana, and Senegal.*

*As part the Canadian government’s “Healthy Eating Strategy,” Health Canada is also developing a national front-of-pack nutrition labelling system to require the food industry to put important nutrition information on the fronts of labels in space that companies now use to make largely misleading nutrition claims. Moving important ingredient and nutrient information from the backs or sides of package labels to the front and reducing the number of calculations and scientific judgements for consumers to make on their own will certainly simplify food labels and make them more useful and less misleading.*

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*Most Canadian foods have been required to display Nutrition Facts since 2005, but:*

- *companies typically display Nutrition Facts on the backs or sides of food packages where the consumer must handle each product to see the information,*
- *Nutrition Facts labels put an unreasonably high burden on consumers to judge and calculate the net meaning of 20 or more nutrition numbers listed without priority and without reliable information about the amounts of ingredients such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and polyunsaturated fat, the under-consumption of which causes two-thirds of nutrition-related deaths in Canada and worldwide, and*
- *labels frequently and prominently display truthful, but misleading claims—such as vitamin levels on breakfast cereals made of sugar and refined flour—and rarely voluntarily warn consumers of negative features.*

*But, there is plenty of room for improvement on voluntary and mandatory front-of-pack labelling systems now in use in Canada and elsewhere. According to the Global Burden of Disease project, excess amounts of sodium (and to a lesser extent, saturated fat and added sugars) cause less than 20% nutrition-related deaths in Canada and globally. Yet Health Canada officials are fine-tuning a proposal at home to prominently flag only high amounts of these three nutrients. Four times as many deaths are caused by insufficient consumption of fruit, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, seafood omega-3 fatty acids, polyunsaturated fat, and fibre. When pressed, Health Canada officials maintain their belief that federal laws governing food labelling require that they focus labelling reforms on these three nutrients to the exclusion of all other ingredients and nutrients.*

*Approximately 80% of Canadian packaged foods exceed at least one WHO threshold for high in sodium, saturated fat, or sugar, so Health Canada's approach for front-of-pack warnings could desensitize consumers to the warnings which would appear on nearly all packaged foods. Also, Health Canada has modified the sugar rule in a way that would exempt nearly all breakfast cereals and jam from the high-sugar warning. Focusing on these three nutrients in this way could also lionize nutritionally vacuous foods like white rice, white bread, and diet pop, and disparage nutritious foods like fish, nuts, seeds, and foods that, for instance, are slightly high in sugar or saturated fat with the same vigour as a food that is packed with sodium.*

*Instead of courting industry support for its labelling reforms, Health Canada should engage the best experts, free from commercial conflicts of interest, to develop a made-in-Canada overall nutritional rating scheme that considers all nutritionally relevant aspects of foods. CHSL will propose a model scheme based on the Global Burden of Disease risk factor estimates and applied it to a diverse basket of sample foods in the upcoming edition of [Food for Life Report](#).*

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**Background:** Bill Jeffery led a Canadian health advocacy campaign for mandatory (back-of-pack) nutrition labelling for the Centre for Science in the Public Interest from 1997-2002, culminating in what was *then* the gold standard for nutrition labelling worldwide. He advocated through IACFO for a [global Codex standard for mandatory back-of-pack nutrition labelling](#) from 1998 until its adoption in 2012 and [proposed the development of a global standard for front-of-pack interpretive nutrition labelling the 2016](#) meeting negotiations of the Codex Committee on Food Labelling.

**The Centre for Health Science and Law** accepts no funding from industry or government. It is financially supported by subscribers to the advertisement-free consumer magazine, [Food for Life Report](#), whose upcoming issue will feature a report on Canadian and international nutrition labelling and a product comparison of Canadian pasta sauces.