



MEDIA STATEMENT

Front of Pack Nutrition Labelling: *The Least Health Canada Could Do*

(June 30, 2022—Ottawa): Today, Hon. Minister of Health Dr. Jean-Yves Duclos, announced plans to mandate notices on labels of some foods containing high amounts of sodium, saturated fat, and sugars in regulations to be published in *Canada Gazette* next Wednesday, July 6, 2022. Bill Jeffery, Executive Director of the Centre for Health Science and Law made the following statement:

“The great thing about warning labels on labels of foods high in saturated fat, sugar and sodium is that they can help counterbalance nutrition marketing claims, for example, about the presence of nutritionally much less consequential beneficial vitamins in sugary breakfast cereals. Health Canada could have prohibited such boastful truthful-but-misleading claims on foods high in sugar, sodium and saturated fat—as other countries do—but it did not.

Health Canada and some health charities tout these nutrient warning labels as addressing the 36,000 nutrition-related deaths the Seattle-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation attributed to poor diet in Canada; but, [high-sodium, -sugar, and -saturated fat account for less than 7,000 of those deaths](#). Most diet-related disease is caused by insufficient consumption of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and polyunsaturated fat, and too much sodium, red meat, refined grains, and saturated fat.

Health Canada’s decision to exempt all unseasoned meat from the saturated-fat warnings squanders any potential to tamp down the more than 5,000 deaths the IHME attributes to red meat consumption alone. Recent media comments from the Heart and Stroke Foundation and Diabetes Association betray their belief that the only nutritional downside to a hamburger on a white bun is salty condiments. That is not supported by the best available evidence, but is music to the ears of many food and the pharmaceutical companies that cause and treat diet-related cardiovascular disease, cancers, and diabetes. Such companies fund so much nutrition research and many civil society organizations.

Health Canada communicators and dietitians will run themselves ragged for the next decade repeating the mantra that having a warning label (or not) does not necessarily mean the food is unhealthy overall (or not). Health Canada still appears to recognize that low-sodium white bread and white rice are nutritionally vacuous. Beef steak and ground beef will never carry warning labels due to feeble rationalizations for tradition and the power of the cattle industry. Many truly nutritious foods will not have any special labelling at all, just like some junk foods and some inexplicably exempt foods.

Health Canada does not have unfettered discretion to design food label rules; it is bound by Parliament’s [Food and Drug Act](#) to ensure labelling protects health and does not mislead consumers. Calling the exemption for meat “practical” does not withstand reason outside of the Ottawa consensus bubble. These regulations are a done deal for now. But, the generous 3½ years Health Canada allows companies to comply with rules (i.e., to interpret information from the back of labels and apply notices to the front) is plenty of time to ensure that the regulations comply with the statute. It is also plenty of time for Health Canada to turn its mind to nutrition labelling 3.0 by developing criteria to nutritionally evaluate foods based on the science and [all nutritionally relevant factors](#) instead of just the most convenient ones and warning labels designed for populations in poor countries in the middle of nutrition transitions. Health Canada, if properly motivated, could improve on [France’s Nutri-score](#) (that is out-performing nutrient warnings across Europe) or [Australia’s Healthy Star](#)—which also capitulated to the meat industry in its algorithm—to advise consumers about the overall healthfulness of all foods.

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Background in nutrition labelling: The Centre for Health Science and Law is a non-profit health advocacy organization specializing in food and nutrition issues. CHSL's executive director, Bill Jeffery, led a coalition of health organizations, the Alliance for Food Label Reform, on behalf of the Centre for Science in the Public Interest to advocate mandatory back-of-pack nutrition labelling from 1997 until promulgation of implementing regulations in 2002. He also represented the International Association of Consumer Food Organization in proposing global guidance on detailed back-of-pack nutrition labelling from 1997 until a global standard was adopted in 2012. He represented the Centre for Health Science and Law through IACFO in 2016 and 2017 (and later the World Obesity Federation) to [propose front-of-pack nutrition labelling standards at United Nations Codex Committee on Food Labelling in 2016](#) until the adoption of guidance in the fall of 2021. He also co-authored "[Policy Recommendations for Front-of-Package, Shelf, and Menu Labelling in Canada: Moving Towards Consensus](#)" in the *Canadian Journal of Public Health* in 2017. Bill has spoken about (and hosted) conference presentations on food labelling at academic and professional health science and legal conferences dozens of times in Canada, Switzerland, the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Kenya, South Africa, Japan, elsewhere, and virtually since the late 1990s.

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