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Front-of-pack Nutri-Score labelling in France: an evidence- based policy

Since Oct 31, 2017, a front-of-pack labelling system named Nutri-Score (a synthetic information system based on colours and letters from green/A to red/E), allowing consumers to see and compare at a glance the nutritional value of pre-packaged foods is being implemented, on a voluntary basis, in France.¹ Although some experts warned that the Nutri-Score might constitute an obstacle to EU trade,² the measure appeared justified on public health grounds. The adoption of the Nutri-Score label was made after a lengthy 4 year process, during which intense lobbying by agro-industry opposed scientific evidence. Although implementation of policies based on research evidence has been repeatedly shown to be necessary by the public health community and policy makers, the reality of political process is often disappointing. Therefore, the French experience with front-of-pack labelling is a compelling model.

Front-of-pack labelling has been identified for several years by WHO and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development as an important strategy to tackle nutrition-related diseases, because it helps consumers make informed decisions on the healthiness of their purchases.³ Moreover, front-of-pack labelling can provide strong incentives to the agro-industry to reformulate its products to improve their nutritional quality.³ Dietary risk factors are leading causes of mortality and disability in the world; dietary risks were estimated to account for 10.3 million deaths worldwide in 2016.⁴ Therefore, curbing the adverse effects of unhealthy diet is a major challenge in public health.

Implementation of front-of-pack labelling was first proposed to the French Minister of Health in 2014;⁵

it was incorporated—in principle—in the Health Law of 2016. The selection of the final graphical format for front-of-pack labelling was controversial and prolonged, involving multiple stakeholders in a consultation process in which scientific evidence finally prevailed. Studies of the nutrient profiling system underlying the Nutri-Score, and comparative studies of the perception, understanding, and use of various strategies of front-of-pack labelling, done between 2014 and 2017 concluded that the Nutri-Score was superior to other formats.⁶ The scientific evidence weighted heavily in the decision by health authorities to adopt the Nutri-Score in France.

The framework in which this political decision was made, with reliance on science, was commended by the EU regional office of WHO.⁷ This experience shows how scientific evidence can help policy makers to face trade and commercial forces. The Nutri-Score provides a tool for adjusting regulatory pressure on the marketing, availability, and pricing of food products to form the basis of consistent policy actions targeting not only consumers, but also their food environment.

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