

Dot-Point Summary

Submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Obesity in Australia

Dr Trevor C Beard, OBE, MA, MBBChir (Cantab) MPH (Berkeley)
 Honorary Research Fellow, Menzies Research Institute, University of Tasmania,
 Private Bag 23, GPO Hobart, Tasmania.

Web www.saltmatters.org

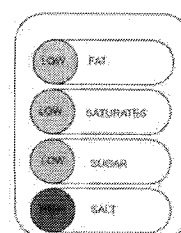
- In the Committee's Terms of Reference this submission is about **the contribution that food labels can make** to controlling the obesity epidemic.
- The artificial diet of industrial societies serves the needs of commerce and food technology but causes an epidemic of preventable disease at a huge cost in money, health and lives. Both obesity and type 2 diabetes are rapidly increasing in prevalence, attributed mainly to high fat intake and lack of exercise.
- Industrially processed foods have a large excess of four nutrients—fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt.
- All of these, including even salt, contribute to the obesity epidemic.
- We need clearer food labels that give shoppers:
 - Better information on what they are buying
 - Its likely health consequences
- We have the mandatory Nutrition Information Panel (NIP), revealing the amounts of the four nutrients that are damaging in excess, and enabling health professionals to give appropriate advice.

average serving size - 30g (1 metric cup †)				
	quantity per serving	%daily intake▲ per serving	per serve with 1/2 cup skim milk	quantity per 100g
ENERGY	470 kJ	5.5%	670 kJ	1580 kJ
PROTEIN	2.3 g	4.7%	7 g	7.8 g
FAT		-		
- TOTAL	< 0.1 g	0.1%	0.2 g	0.2 g
- SATURATED	< 0.1 g	0.1%	0.1 g	< 0.1 g
CARBOHYDRATE		-		
- TOTAL	25.1 g	8.1%	31.6 g	83.6 g
- SUGARS	2.4 g	2.6%	8.8 g	7.9 g
DIETARY FIBRE	0.8 g	2.6%	0.8 g	2.6 g
SODIUM	216 mg	9.4%	273 mg	720 mg

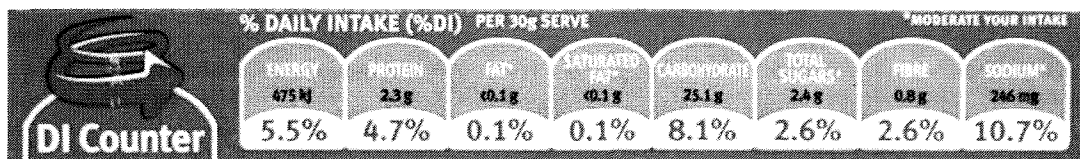
- The NIP shown above applies to Kellogg Corn Flakes and is copied from the Kellogg (Australia) website. Manufacturers are free to added nutrients, and Kellogg has added dietary fibre.

- Members of the public who claim to be reading the NIP seldom realise that sodium has any connection with salt, and they cannot be expected to discover or remember what figures would be considered high, medium or low for each of the four nutrients.
- The Australia 2020 Summit recommended the Commonwealth to remedy this by adopting the UK **traffic light food labels**.
- Red, amber and green lights indicate high, medium and low figures in the NIP for fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. Shoppers can spot foods low in fat, etc without even taking them off the shelf and without remembering or even looking at any numbers.

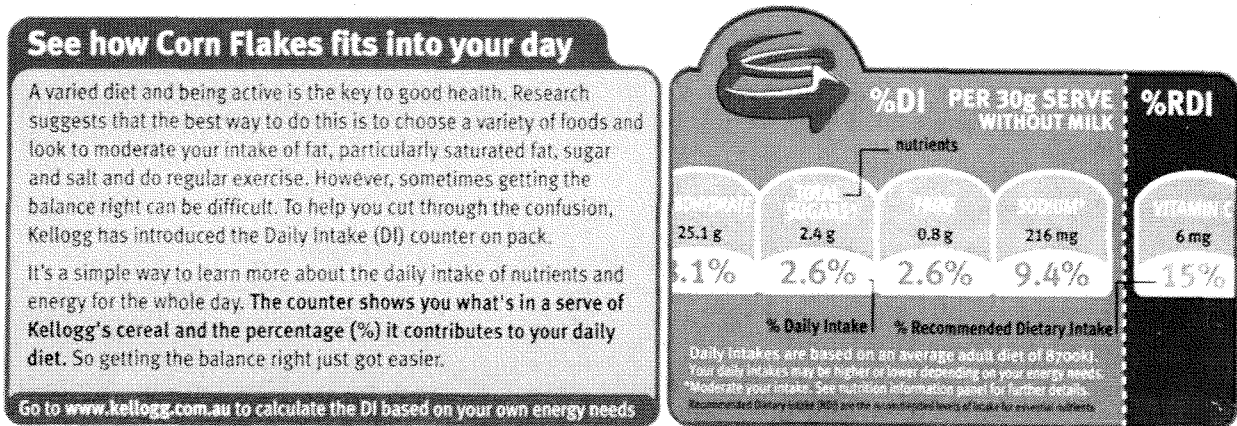
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- The traffic lights Kellogg Corn Flakes would show under the UK criteria are shown next to the NIP. The lights show the shopper the consensus of an expert panel of nutritionists on the amounts of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt in the NIP.
- Nearly every manufacturer sells a processed food that would get at least one red light. This is the heart of the problem. The more red lights the greater the contribution this food makes to the obesity epidemic—especially red lights for fats and sugar.
- The whole food industry strongly opposes traffic light labels, apparently fearing that they would achieve their intended purpose and alter shopping behaviour.
- The UK traffic lights are still voluntary, sparing Kellogg (UK) the embarrassment of showing red lights on cereals being advertised as “healthy”.
- Kellogg (UK) invented an alternative with unprecedented speed. Kellogg (Australia) uses it and calls it the Percent Daily Intake (%DI) Counter.
- It consists of a row of 12 percentages printed on the front of a box of cereal. The first eight are based on the NIP (with fibre added)—see below—and the remainder show the amounts of Vitamin C, folate, iron and zinc.

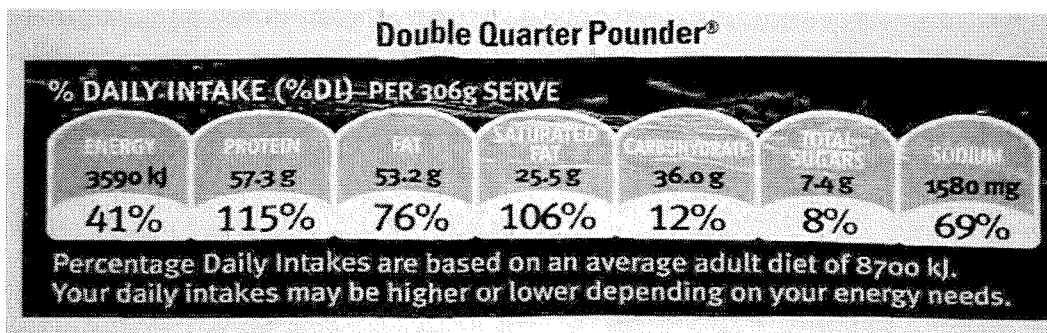


- shoppers have to interpret the meaning of these percentages for themselves, with the aid of the advice printed in this panel on the back of the box:



The political reality

- The food industry traditionally gets its own way, even at the level of the World Health Organisation (Nestlé M. Food politics: how the food industry influences nutrition and health. Berkeley, California: University of California Press; 2002).
- It can afford a large and well-funded political lobby, and UK government food policy is known to have been influenced by large donations and/or withdrawals of donations to political parties (British Medical Journal 1996;312:1238–40).
- Kellogg (Australia) is a major financial supporter (“Gold Sponsor”) of the Dietitians’ Association of Australia—so predictably the DAA endorses the %DI Counter.
- The Australian Food & Grocery Council aims to make the %DI Counter so widely used by member companies that in due course the powerful industry lobby can claim a *fait accompli*—that the %DI Counter has become the industry standard and that dietitians endorse it.
- McDonald’s Restaurants have already adopted it, and this is how the %DI Counter looks on a Double Quarter Pounder:



- McDonald's Restaurants don't mind revealing that a Double Quarter Pounder supplies 115% of the Daily Intake for protein, 76% of the DI for fat, 106% for saturated fat and 69% of the so-called Daily Intake* for sodium (1580 mg).
- Why are McDonald's being so frank?
- I offer this as clear evidence that McDonald's expect lists of percentages to have little if any effect on sales to the majority of people who go there for a meal.
- I also offer it as clear evidence that McDonald's share our belief that the alternative—three red lights on a Double Quarter Pounder for fat, saturated fat and salt—would be more likely to alter shopping behaviour, which is the express purpose of traffic light labels.
- A war against obesity has to be fought with blunt weapons. One of our sharpest weapons is a mandatory food label telling *everybody* what they are buying—at a glance, without needing reading glasses, literacy or numeracy. Even children can understand when Mum refuses to buy them foods with red lights for fat.
- However it is essential to **give the food industry enough time to reformulate its products**. Bankruptcy of even one business is not the Australian recipe for reform. Sweeping reform is nevertheless urgent, and there is a strong case for research and development grants and other financial assistance for selected companies to keep them afloat in a period of rapid change.

Submission

I would like to submit the following:

1. Evidence that traffic light labels would have bipartisan support. See Margaret May's private member's bill to the House (Hansard, Monday 17 September 2007, pages 12–13).
2. 10-page PDF on the pros and cons of traffic light labels and the %DI Counter (click Food Traffic Lights on www.saltmatters.org)
3. 4-page PDF on salt, traffic lights and controlling the hypertension epidemic (click ABC Radio Talk on www.saltmatters.org)
4. An article I feel sure you already have— Zimmet PZ, James WPT. The unstoppable Australian obesity and diabetes juggernaut. What should politicians do? *Medical Journal of Australia* 2006;85:187–88.
5. A letter supporting the Zimmet and James article—Beard TC, Nowson CA, Riley MD. Traffic-light food labels. *Med J Aust.* 2007;186:19.

*the figure they call the “Daily Intake” for sodium is 2300 mg (100 mmol), which is the Tolerable Upper Limit (the absolute maximum). The NHMRC *Suggested Daily Target for preventing chronic disease* is 1600 mg (70 mmol), and the Double Quarter Pounder supplies 1580 mg (69 mmol) in a single serving of one meal.