

Food, glorious food?

Are consumers getting the information they need to make healthy food choices? We ask Dame Deirdre Hutton, chair of the government's Food Standards Agency



Deirdre Hutton: 'Labelling has got to be clear and straightforward'

Q Why are we facing an obesity time bomb and whose fault is it?

A I don't think I know the answer to that in absolute terms and I don't think anybody does. It's a very complex phenomenon that's happening right across the Western world and in developing countries as well. But you can see things that you believe ought to be different and there are issues about what we eat and the way in which we eat as opposed to the amount of exercise we take. But obesity seems to be a very, very complex issue.

Q You believe there should be a complete ban on unhealthy food ads before the 9pm watershed. Why?

A I don't believe there is one single answer to solving the problem of obesity but there are lots of steps that one could take. One of them is trying to make sure that children at an impressionable age and teenagers with money to spend are not bathed in advertisements that encourage them to buy food

which is high in salt, fat and sugar. At the moment the vast majority of advertisements are promoting those sorts of food and we want to change the balance towards healthier advertising.

Q Why is the FSA traffic light scheme used by the likes of Sainsbury's and Waitrose better than those adopted by Tesco and so on?

A Our scheme is a good and robust scheme. We conducted some rigorous research with 2,600 consumers which tested both what they liked – their preference – and also tested their performance – whether they were

able to use this information. It remains the only major piece of research in the public domain around signpost labelling. I come from a background which says if you want to help consumers, who make a decision on average about every ten seconds in the supermarket, then what you provide them with by way of labelling has got to be very clear and very straightforward.

Q How will you put pressure on food companies who aren't using your signposting scheme to adopt it?

A Our model is the one we think answers consumer needs and the way we will persuade everybody

else is by the evidence that emerges. There's already been a huge change, because if you wind back the clock three years, not one of those companies would have talked about putting front-of-pack labelling on. The biggest part of the retail market is using traffic light colours on its packaging, which is very good.

Q Did Cadbury's handle its salmonella outbreak irresponsibly?

A I'm surprised that Cadbury's didn't tell us earlier that it had had problems with salmonella. I would say that since we came to an agreement with Cadbury's about the need for it to make changes, the process has been exemplary. Cadbury's is making real changes – and not before time.

Q What have been the FSA's main successes?

A I think its main success has been restoring a degree of sanity and confidence to the whole area of food. Issues like BSE and Variant CJD are not now high up on the list of things that people worry about. There have been some huge successes like the fall in salmonella in eggs – we've gone from being the dirty man of Europe to being among the best in Europe – and a reduction of about 20 per cent in food poisoning.

Q If you were queen for a day, what would you change for consumers?

A I would want sparklingly fresh fruit and green vegetables available to every household in the country at a reasonable cost.

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