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Feature Article

Consumers' Right to Information, crucial to be healthy!

This year, the World Consumer Rights Day, a global annual event celebrated on 15th March, has a special theme, "Consumers' Right to Healthy Food".

This theme is very fitting as *what we eat is what we become!*

Today, the world is facing a major health crisis because of obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes. The global economic impact from obesity alone is roughly US\$2.0 trillion, or 2.8 per cent of global GDP, roughly equivalent to the global impact from smoking or armed violence, war, and terrorism.

Fiji is no exception as presently, 1 in every 3 persons is diabetic. Neither are we immunedtoobesity.

There is certainly a need for a global transformation in the way people eat. All consumers need the right, not just to food, but to healthy food.

Therefore, **consumer choice of food is central** to containing the growing health crisis related to Non-Communicable diseases.

The Council strongly believes that consumers who rely on pre-packaged food and beverages, which is common in Fiji, need clear **nutrition labelling (nutrition information) to lead them to healthy food choices**. They must have access to clear and accurate information about the food they consume. Consumers' right to information is key to ensuring they eat healthy food.

For instance, when you do your regular grocery shopping at a supermarket – how many of you are able to read and understand the Nutrition Labels on the food packets?

The question to ponder is – are you able to interpret the Nutrition panel printed at the back of the food items?

Unfortunately, not every consumer is able to read, let alone interpret the nutrition labels simply because many of these nutrition panels are written in **fine prints** or have jargons which they don't know such as "No Added MSG".

Nutrition labelling provides point of sale food guidance whilst retaining consumer freedom of choice.

Nutrition information is vital for consumers, therefore, the Council joins hands with Consumers International in calling for star-rating or traffic light type of label that will not require consumers to interpret the nutritional value and understand all such jargons used in the labels.

Some consumers lack the time or skills to interpret detailed nutrition information on the back of the package and prefer simplified information, positioned on the front. Nutrition labels are commonly displayed on food packaging and are intended to guide consumer food choices.

Various studies suggest that consumers prefer **simplified information** on the front of the package

There are two general types of nutrition label:The first, and traditional type, is the ‘nutrition declaration’ label, which lists energy content and levels of key nutrients - including fat, salt and sugar - and is commonly found on the back of the packaging (BOP).

The second, more recent type of label, provides, ‘supplementary nutrition information’. Often positioned on the *front of the package* (FOP), this is intended to help consumers to identify healthy food choices ‘at a glance’ without having to read the full nutrient declaration on the BOP, perform calculations or understand percentages.

The FOP being considered is the *health star rating* system similar to that jointly adopted by Australia and New Zealand. The other schemes are the traffic light (UK) percentage daily intake format, tick system (e.g. Heart Foundation tick) and other smaller ones.

The ‘front-of-pack’ nutrition label is the way forward.

Read more on 2015 WCRD, next week