


Front-of-package labelling of food products in Argentina


Etiquetado frontal de productos alimenticios en Argentina

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Regarding the issue that is being discussed in Argentina about package labeling, we would like to introduce the position adopted by the InterAmerican Heart Foundation, which has conducted several studies and brought forward a number of proposals regarding labeling policies throughout 2018.

Package labeling is known to be a source of vital information for the population, as it discloses the main characteristics of the product.

Argentina's Food Code regulates package labeling in that country. However, this Code only deals with hygiene, food science and commercial identification of a product, and therefore, does not include a viewpoint on the prevention of non-communicable

chronic diseases. For that reason, the current regulation on package labeling is not sufficient to promote an appropriate diet and, at the same time, it leaves a significant loophole that food companies exploit, confusing the consumer. At present, for instance, providing information about the amount of added sugars in the nutrition facts table of products is not mandatory.

It is necessary to tighten current regulations to ensure the right of consumers to obtain clear and accurate information, enabling them to select healthier options. Implementing a simple and clear label may contribute – along with other measures – to the prevention of being overweight and developing non-communicable chronic diseases.

In accordance with Argentina's existing regulatory framework, labels of food products must include, without exception, the following items: the product's trade name; the ingredients list; the nutrition facts table including quantitative caloric and nutrients values; the net quantity of contents; the origin of the product; in the case of imported food, the importer's corporate name and address; the lot number; the product's expiration date; and the preparation and operating instructions of the product, whenever necessary.

In legal terms, harmonizing Argentina's national legislation with Mercosur's regulations does not pose any obstacle due to the flexibility offered by international trading mechanisms. It is well known that flexibility in a provision implies its ability to adapt to new circumstances. Such circumstances include, for example, the need to restrict commerce rights in order to protect public health. Such flexibility is recognized by the framework of international trade agreements and even by Mercosur's set of rules. Mercosur member states have the power to improve national rules protecting the health of their populations, even if they go against regional legislation. The reason for this lies in the intention of each State to safeguard its sovereign power through the recognized flexibility of agreements, which put sanitary conditions protection over trade clauses.

It is widely known that, in Argentina, consumers do not receive clear and precise information about food products, which hinders their ability to make healthy choices. A study conducted by the InterAmerican Heart Foundation-Argentina (IAHF-Argentina)⁽¹⁾ reveals that package labels in breakfast cereals, desserts, and cookies show contradictory and confusing information to consumers. The research also showed that 9 out of every 10 of these products contain low nutritional values and, in the case of marketing strategies regarding the labels, that 4 out of every 10 products with low nutritional values display nutrition claims (such as "*Source of vitamins and minerals*"), and that 3 out of every 10 used cartoon characters. The study results show that Argentina needs a statutory provision regulating package labels in food products that should protect the consumers' right to health, to a proper diet, and to information.

There is vast evidence showing that the excessive consumption of saturated fats, sugars and sodium has a negative impact on health, promoting the development of obesity and other non-communicable chronic diseases. For that reason, it is necessary to complement the nutrition facts table with a front-of-package label that clearly and explicitly lists the contents of those critical nutrients.

Evidence reveals that warning systems are the most effective front-of-package labeling systems to date; they empower consumers to make informed and healthier^(2,3,4) decisions, and encourage the food industry to reformulate their products in order to comply with the established profile and avoid warning labels on their packages.⁽⁵⁾

Comparative research studies conducted in Latin America reveal that the warning system has yielded better results in facilitating the identification and selection by consumers of less healthy products when compared to the traffic light labeling system,^(1,3) and to the system that indicates the recommended daily intake or *guideline daily amounts* (GDA).⁽⁶⁾ Moreover, the former system has had a stronger impact on children when measured against the traffic light labeling system.^(1,6) Its influence has recently been compared to

assessment systems such as Nutriscore and the Health Rating System, proving to be more effective when it comes to changing consumers' perception of healthy products, and the likelihood of their buying products with high levels of critical nutrients.⁽³⁾

Therefore, the nutrition warning system may achieve the greatest impact upon reducing the sale of products with high levels of saturated fats, added sugars and sodium. Moreover, it informs consumers about the excessive contents of nutrients in products, which can be verified in the nutrition facts table. It follows that this system, which highlights the contents of critical nutrients, would be the most suitable for the prevention of obesity and other non-communicable chronic diseases.

Another important issue that must be included in front-labeling policies is the regulation of marketing strategies and the use of nutrition and health claims on food packages. In addition to marketing strategies, the food industry has introduced nutrition and health claims in products with the aim of convincing consumers to identify them as healthier products. Studies have shown that these claims lead children to prefer these products over those that do not have such claims.⁽⁷⁾ The policies implemented in many countries have considered these elements at the time of drafting the rules concerning front-labeling of food products in each country.^(8,9,10)

Several countries have already adopted this system, setting a precedent for the rest of the countries of the region. Chile in 2016,⁽⁸⁾ Peru in 2017,⁽¹¹⁾ and Uruguay in 2018⁽¹²⁾ have established a mandatory front-labeling system that warns consumers about excessive contents of sodium, added sugars and saturated fats. In 2015, Ecuador implemented a traffic light labeling system.⁽¹³⁾ A qualitative study assessing the impact of this measure reveals a low influence and motivation in the selection of healthy products.⁽¹⁴⁾

Conversely, studies conducted on the warning system show positive results. In Chile, an impact evaluation study reflects that 91.6% of consumers consider that the presence of warning labels on packaged food

products influence their purchase decision (they choose products with fewer stamps; they do not buy the product or they buy fewer products). This study also showed that, since the implementation of the system, 18% of products have been reformulated (for example: 65% of dairy products and 48% of processed meat products).⁽⁵⁾

Finally, during the 42nd Regular Meeting of Mercosur Member and Associate States Health Ministers held in Paraguay in June 2018, Argentina signed, along with the other countries of the region, various agreements to promote front-of-package labeling of products containing excessive amounts of saturated fats, sodium and sugars.⁽¹⁵⁾

In conclusion, we believe that Argentina should move forward regarding the promotion of a nutritional warning system such as the one implemented in Chile, Uruguay and Peru that clearly and explicitly indicates, on the front of the package, the amount of critical nutrients such as saturated fats, sugars and sodium. This nutritional warning system should be aimed at the general population and, especially, at the vulnerable populations.

Another key step is the adoption of a nutrients profile based on scientific evidence and aligned with the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for Argentina's Population (GAPA) [*Guías Alimentarias de la Población Argentina*] and without any conflicts of interest in order to identify food products with high levels of critical nutrients.

We believe that the regulation must include not only the labeling of food products, but also the use of marketing strategies for products with low nutritional quality and the use of optional labeling elements (such as nutrition and health claims and endorsements by health and nutrition organizations) for packages of low nutritional quality food according to the selected nutrients profile model. A mandatory report on the quantity of added sugars on the nutrition facts table on packages must also be promoted by the regulation.

It is essential that front-of-package labeling policies be complemented by a communication campaign aimed at the general public, including and especially considering

young girls, boys and teenagers. Said campaign should also promote other policies such as healthier school environments, the restriction of marketing strategies on food products with low nutritional quality levels, and tax policies, to name a few, with the purpose of improving conditions and preventing non-communicable chronic diseases among the entire population.

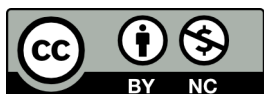
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