What’s on the Label?

When you are buying food, are you one of the 30% of shoppers (an estimate in the United Kingdom) who always read the labels, or one of the 20% who rarely or never give them a glance? Do you know what to make of them if you read them?

Labels are meant to inform you and to help you to choose. But when you go shopping, how much time do you have to read about the differences between 30 types of chicken soup or 300 varieties of breakfast cereal? Consumers seem to want more and more choice, and consumer pressure groups definitely want more information on food labels. Choice and information are also attractive to regulators, because these options are less likely to be viewed as restricting individual freedom or stifling food industry innovation than the alternative of regulating food content.

In the United States, labeling regulations are largely about the material content. In Europe, the method and place of production may also be specified in law, even if they make no material difference to the contents. This difference in approach is evident in the labeling of genetically modified (GM) foods. Whether the plant from which a food is made is GM is irrelevant in the United States, given its emphasis on overall content rather than process. But in Europe, labeling of foods containing DNA or protein from GM plants is mandatory, and legislation has now been extended to include purified derivatives such as glucose syrup and canola oil (but not products from animals fed on GM animal feed or products made with GM technology, such as cheese).

Transatlantic differences in food labeling are also apparent when it comes to the biggest current challenge for food policy: obesity. Doing something about obesity is especially difficult for governments and regulators, because diet and lifestyle are in the territory of personal freedom, not state intervention. At the same time, the health care costs are potentially huge, so the pressure for action is on. The blend of action that is emerging, in both Europe and the United States, includes voluntary changes by the food industry, public education, and better labeling. Some countries and U.S. states are going even further; for instance, by restricting what can be sold in school vending machines and restricting television advertising. All of these changes are meant to make it easier for people to choose a healthy diet.

The world’s fattest nation, the United States, has what is arguably the best nutrition labeling, with a mandatory nutrition facts panel. So would better labeling help? The largest food retailer in the United Kingdom, Tesco, has said that it plans to test a “traffic light” system, using red, yellow, and green colors to give consumers simple information about the main nutrients. Some object to this because of the potential implication that there are good (green) and bad (red) foods, whereas the traditional mantra from nutritionists is that there are only good and bad diets. But the food/diet distinction has changed as many people rely increasingly on ready-made meals or snacks. Research in the United Kingdom suggests that people would actually favor a simple sign-posting system such as traffic lights.

The food industry is responding to public interest in diet and health by making foods that claim to have specific health benefits. These come close to the border between food and medicine. You can buy cholesterol-reducing margarine, eggs that contain long-chain omega-3 unsaturated fatty acids, and yogurts that claim to help you balance your gut flora. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has a three-tiered system for such health claims, depending on the strength of the evidence for the claim. The European Union does not have specific regulations, but plans to introduce rules within the next 2 years that will require the independent evaluation of health claims by the European Food Safety Authority. The implications of science-based regulation are enormous for the worldwide food industry, both because products that claim to improve your health are generally highly profitable and because, in the science of nutrition, there is often disagreement among experts. Over the next decade, increases in our understanding of the relationship between an individual’s genetic makeup and his or her nutritional needs will open up a whole new area for debate about what goes on the label. The world of choice is not going to get any easier.

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Editor's Summary

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