

Ignorance and Bliss No More

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Despite America's obsession with health and nutrition, the nation continues to struggle with steadily increasing rates of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other related health risks. Public concern and waistlines alike are growing. New initiatives, like Michelle Obama's Let's Move! Campaign are fighting against childhood obesity, but ignorance and misinformation about food and exercise still reign supreme.

As lawmakers and the public continue to debate the more prominent features of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, one item has gone unnoticed. In an attempt to empower consumers to change their eating habits, the new healthcare law mandates that all restaurant chains of 20 sites or more will be required to post the calorie amounts in the food on their menus and drive-through boards by 2011.

Some states, like New York, have already required this of chain restaurants, and many food companies like McDonald's have been voluntarily placing nutritional information on their product wrappers for years. However, this new approach aims to nutritionally enlighten consumers across the country to encourage them to choose a lower calorie item before they order.

Seeing the harsh display of the calories in that burger or milkshake will certainly be a wake up call for many, but is it enough? And will people really take notice? *Therapy Times* spoke with three nutritional professionals to get their take on the issue and what it means to public health consciousness.

Round Table Therapists:

- **Janet Brill**, PhD, RD, LDN, director of nutrition with *Fitness Together* and author of *Cholesterol Down: 10 Simple Steps to Lower Your Cholesterol in 4 Weeks – Without Prescription Drugs* (Three Rivers, Dec. 2006) and *The Heart Disease Reversal Plan* (Three Rivers, Feb. 2011).
- **Heather Huey**, RD, LDN, director of nutrition with *LA Weight Loss*, headquartered in Horsham, Pa.
- **Miriam Pappo**, MS, RD, CDN, director of clinical nutrition at *Montefiore Medical Center* in Bronx, N.Y.

Therapy Times: Do you think calorie labels like this will help consumers make healthier choices or will it be ignored?

Janet Brill: Yes, I think that calorie labeling would result in a huge public health payoff. Considering that 66 percent of Americans are currently overweight or obese and the fact that a recent scientific forecast estimates 86 percent of adults in the US will be overweight or obese by 2030 – with related healthcare spending projected to be as much as \$956.9 billion according to a 2008 study by Wang, et al. that appeared in *Obesity* – it is high time we take action to stem the tide of this killer.

Eventually, obesity and its associated negative health sequelae will permeate the public's radar just as cigarette smoking did over the last few decades. Calorie labeling will clearly help consumers to make healthier food choices. Considering that most Americans eat out at least one or two times per week, this labeling law is long overdue.

Heather Huey: In many cases, having calorie labels will help consumers make healthier choices. Many consumers know that a food is not a healthy choice, but seeing the real calories and fat grams a food contains will help discourage the consumer from purchasing it. Even if only 50 percent of consumers are impacted by the labels, it a health improvement in five out of 10 people; that is significant.

Miriam Pappo: Some people are quite surprised to learn that one sandwich or one entrée at a restaurant can be the entire day's allotment of calories. Some restaurants have one entrée that has over 1,800 calories. If you have one meal at certain fast food restaurants, you have three quarters of your daily allocation of calories and over 100 percent of your fat from one food item or one meal. That means you can't really eat the rest of the day, if you care.

Other people, they don't want to know or they don't care, [for example] if it's a special occasion. It's a mixed bag; some people have said outright they will look for other choices and others don't want to know. A subset of the "I don't want to know" crowd is that they don't understand what it means. Maybe they don't realize that that's three quarters of everything they need for the day.

TT: Much of this law aims at visibly labeling calorie amounts on drive-through boards and menus. Is this enough?

Brill: I absolutely agree with supporting the most aggressive means of regulating food purveyors to display *all* nutrition information for *all* foods sold to consumers in a very easy-to-read and highly visible location. This would include calorie count for the amount of food portioned out – and *not* for a "serving size" – plus the amount of sodium, bad fat, and added sugar per portion sold, plus the region of origin to encourage people to buy locally grown.

Huey: It would benefit consumers to have all nutrition information and ingredients used in the restaurants available on the Internet. This will allow them the option of reviewing food items and making decisions before

they even leave their home.

In the restaurants, having the nutritional facts on drive-through boards and menus is enough. Additional information on ingredients, preparation, and cooking methods should be available upon request.

Pappo: In general I think this is a good idea. It increases people's awareness of just how many calories are in something.

I would like it if they could have the sodium level some place consistently and visibly. It cannot all be on the same board; it just cannot be. In some fast food restaurants, you have a meal and you choose one entrée and then have two sides. You have a range there, and so they list a range of something like 300 calories all the way up to more than 1,000, but they don't have the room to explain how they got there. It's very confusing as it is. When you look at that, you have no idea what you're ordering, so you have a greater tendency to not pay attention to it.

It would be fun if [fast food restaurants] had a little computer for people who care. They could go in and press what they're going to order and it'll tell you [the nutritional information]. If you could do it right there, whatever the fast food place is, you could just type it right in.

TT: Why do you think restaurant chains were targeted over local eateries?

Brill: First let's start with regulation of the feeding stations for the masses, then move to the local eateries.

Huey: Restaurant chains use more standardized recipes and menu items. This makes the portions and ingredients much more consistent. In restaurant chains, the goal is have the menu items taste the same from chain to chain. This standardization allows the nutritional information to remain consistent. Local eateries have more flexibility in their recipes and cooking. Portions and ingredients may vary from week to week, which will change the nutritional content.

Pappo: Chain restaurants stick to one recipe and they adhere to it more consistently. And they have the money to provide nutritional analysis. If a small mom-and-pop restaurant were to have to buy nutritional software that would be costly. They also tend to adapt their recipes almost weekly to what their customers want. It may not be as accurate in a smaller establishment that may not have the money and that changes their recipes more frequently.

TT: What impact will this have on people? On the food industry?

Brill: It will be good for the people's health and bad for the food industry's profits, which is why there is resistance among restaurateurs.

Huey: Giving people knowledge and information is giving people the power to make healthier choices and informed decisions. People will be able to use the information to benefit their health. Reading the calories and fat grams will help people trying to lose weight, and knowing the grams of carbohydrates and sugar will allow diabetics to better control their blood sugar.

People on a sodium- or cholesterol-restricted diet will be able to make health conscious choices. People will be made aware of portion sizes. They may only consume half of the meal and take half home for another meal to save calories.

The food industry will also be given the power to make the decisions to promote their healthier choices by highlighting lower calorie, fat, and sodium choices. To do this, portions may become smaller, which will save consumers calories and money.

Pappo: I would really love to see sodium listed. I think if people really could see how much sodium is in an item, it would ultimately influence the food industry to modify its recipes. I think that as people realize that restaurants and other businesses in the food industry are out to make a profit, they will provide what the customer wants.

Once the customer knows and cares and voices their concern, either out of financial need, desire for customer satisfaction, or even embarrassment, [the industry] will modify their products.

TT: Does labeling like this sound the death knell for our nation's fast food and restaurant chain industries or could it have positive implications for these companies, too?

Brill: Fast food and chain restaurants can "do the right thing" by selling healthier fare in reasonable portions to Americans. Eventually, this will reflect positively on these companies.

Huey: Many fast food chains have had nutritional information on their boards, menus, and even their food containers for some time now. Business sales do not seem to have been affected by this information. The positives for these companies are that their healthy menu items – which sometimes are more expensive – have increased in popularity. It's a win-win for restaurants and consumers.

Pappo: No, I think we'll always have fried food. You're not going to get rid of fast food because we're in a fast country and everything is fast paced. Unfortunately, other healthy fast food establishments have not caught on yet. They've tried, but they haven't succeeded, yet. Or they can't make it as cheaply, yet, because they're not as large...yet. I think over time we will see a change. I can't quantify the change, but something will be happening.

TT: Anything to add?

Brill: A recent study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* modeled what would happen if Americans

decreased their average daily sodium consumption by 1,200 milligrams. It is estimated that such a cutback would prevent up to 120,000 new cases of heart disease each year, and save up to 92,000 lives and \$24 billion in healthcare costs. That's a tremendous savings of life and cost for a simple dietary change.

We cannot afford to continue along this path of literally feeding ourselves into an early grave. The labeling law is the first step in taking action to quell the tide of ominous health-related consequences – the result of what Americans are choosing to put into their mouths.

Huey: Providing consumers with nutritional information will be of great benefit in this country's overall health and weight epidemic. Having the knowledge and information will allow consumers who want to make better choices the choice to do so. Restaurants can increase their sales and reputation by offering and highlighting the healthier choices. This may motivate restaurants to cook their food using healthier methods, and provide smaller portions and healthier menu options.

— Kelly Olsen-Stanko

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