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EDITORIAL

When foods are not equal: implications for nutrition policy and practice

Food choices are central to health, but they are made in increasingly complex food environments that do not always support healthier decisions. South Africa, like many countries globally, is experiencing a growing burden of obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs), prompting the government to implement strategies that aim to improve diets and population health.[1] One of the most widely adopted responses has been the development of food-based dietary guidelines, grounded in the best available evidence on the relationship between diet and health.[2] In South Africa, the food-based dietary guidelines underpin much of our nutrition messaging and practice, providing an overarching framework for what constitutes a healthy diet.

However, diets are not consumed as recommendations; they are built from combinations of individual foods, selected, prepared, and eaten in various quantities and combinations, and in various contexts over time. While dietary guidelines appropriately highlight overall dietary patterns, foods remain the physical items which people purchase, prepare and consume daily. Over the past two decades, the South African food system has become increasingly commercialised, with an increase in the availability and affordability of commercially produced packaged foods, many being highly or ultra-processed, with high energy, sugar, saturated fat, and sodium content.[3] At the same time, there has been a shift away from home-produced and home-prepared foods towards ready-to-eat and convenience products.

Along with these changes, consumers are faced with a growing range of food products marketed as healthier alternatives, often accompanied by persuasive claims such as 'plant-based', 'organic', 'gluten-free' and 'natural'. Social media, influencers, and evolving dietary trends further increase these messages,[4] adding to the complexity of food choices. As a result, consumers are increasingly required to judge the healthiness of individual foods in a crowded and commercial food landscape, whether shopping in-store or online. For nutrition professionals, this presents a critical challenge. While evaluating diet quality as healthier or less healthy may be relatively straightforward, classifying individual foods, each contributing only a small part of the diet, is far less so. As noted by Julia et al., no single food is inherently health-promoting or harmful in isolation; rather, it's the habitual combination of food over time that shapes diet quality and health outcomes.[5] Increasing this challenge, research shows that even within food groups broadly promoted by dietary guidelines, substantial variability in nutrient composition exists, particularly among commercially produced foods[6], further complicating both consumer decision-making and professional nutrition guidance.

For this reason, the science of nutrient profiling has emerged as an approach to classify the nutritional quality of individual foods based on their nutrient composition, with the aim of promoting health and preventing disease.[7] Nutrient profiling is widely recognised as a transparent and systematic method for evaluating the nutritional quality of foods,[8] and for informing health strategies that seek to improve both the quality of individual foods and overall diets.

In response to this increasingly complex and dynamic food landscape, simplified food labelling systems informed by nutrient profiling, such as front-of-pack (FOP) nutrition labelling, have been proposed as policy tools to support consumers in making healthier choices at the point of purchase.[9] In South Africa, this approach is reflected in the draft food labelling Regulations (R.3337),[10] which propose mandatory FOP warning labels for packaged foods high in nutrients of concern, namely total sugar, saturated fat, sodium, and artificial sweeteners per 100 g or ml.

Within this context, the article by Mambolo et al.[11] in this issue of the *South African Journal of Clinical Nutrition* addresses an important and underexplored question: the extent of nutritional variability within a single, widely consumed food group, and how this variability differs by both grain type (modern grains, oats, and other ancient grains) and preparation method (ready-to-eat, instant, and cooking-required). The authors focus on porridges and breakfast cereals, which are staple foods[12] in South African diets and are also promoted within the South African Food-Based Dietary Guidelines. This makes the findings particularly relevant for nutrition policy and practice. By applying the proposed South African FOP warning label criteria, the study moves beyond treating this food group as nutritionally homogenous and instead illustrates how both preparation method and ingredient choice influence the healthiness of packaged foods.

Using a cross-sectional analysis of 271 packaged porridge and breakfast cereal products available in major South African supermarkets, the authors demonstrate that preparation method plays a critical role in determining healthiness and FOP warning label requirements. Products requiring cooking, which are typically less processed, consistently exhibited more favourable nutrient profiles, including higher protein and dietary fibre content and lower sugar and sodium levels, compared to instant and ready-to-eat products. In contrast, a substantial proportion of ready-to-eat (75.2%) and instant (83.5%) products required FOP warning labels under the draft Regulations (R.3337). Grain type further differentiated products within this category, with oat-based products showing more favourable profiles (50.0% requiring warning labels) compared with products containing other ancient grains (75.4%) and those made with modern grains (81.9%).

These findings highlight that the nutritional quality of foods commonly perceived as healthy can vary, particularly when such foods are extensively processed into flavoured, instant, or ready-to-eat products. This variability is largely driven by the commercialisation of the food system, including ultra-processing, which alters the original food matrix and combines multiple ingredients into affordable and palatable ready-to-eat products that are often higher in energy, sugar, saturated fat, and sodium, and lower in dietary fibre.[5] In this context, health-oriented claims and marketing cues may create a *health halo*, whereby foods are perceived as healthier based on a single favourable attribute, despite an overall less favourable nutritional profile. For this reason, food labelling regulations play an important role in protecting the public from

potentially misleading messages and in guiding healthier food choices. In South Africa, however, food price remains a dominant driver of food choice,[13] once again highlighting the complexity of improving food choices and, ultimately, population diets.

FOP nutrition labelling has demonstrated potential to improve both the quality of food choices and the nutritional quality of foods available on the market.[14] However, concerns have been raised regarding the unintended consequences of FOP warning labels, including the dichotomisation of foods as 'healthy' or 'unhealthy'.[5,14] Foods are consumed as part of overall dietary patterns, and food choices are shaped by a complex interplay of factors that extend well beyond health considerations alone. For this reason, FOP nutrition labelling should be implemented alongside complementary measures, including nutrition education and public awareness campaigns, to strengthen consumer understanding and supportive policies, such as the sodium-reduction regulation (R.214) and the Health Promotion Levy. These examples emphasise that nutrition policies cannot function in silos but rather require coordinated action across multiple sectors to have a meaningful influence on complex, real-world food choices.

Ultimately, improving diet quality and population health requires moving beyond reliance on any single tool or intervention. Food-based dietary guidelines and FOP nutrition labelling should be viewed as complementary approaches, with dietary guidelines providing the overarching framework for healthy eating patterns and FOP nutrition labelling supporting food choices at the point of purchase. For dietitians and nutrition professionals, this reinforces the importance of interpreting and applying these tools within the broader context of dietary patterns, food environments, and lived realities, ensuring that policy and practice work together to support healthier and more achievable food choices.

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