

Choices about dietary health – you decide!

“Food as medicine – society as a hospital”

With the huge cost of diet – related disease in the UK as its policy driver, the Government has embarked on what it calls a “personalization” agenda. It is, in other words, an effort to make us all more individually responsible for our own eating choices and health. But is it a brave new venture in self- selecting lifestyle or a sign that national Government efforts in the areas of nutrition and diet are being abandoned to the “market forces” of consumer demand and powerful multinational food groups?

The Food Ethics Council has just published a report – “Getting Personal – shifting responsibilities for dietary health” – which attempts to answer such questions. It concludes that personalization as applied to food in the UK will not deliver a national boost to well being as desired by the Department of Health and will fail to deliver the cost-cutting aims of the Treasury.

Instead, says the Food Ethics Council, the Government should concentrate its efforts on improving the food rights of UK citizens. And it demands –

1/ Improved food labeling, better regulated food promotion and an improvement in the nutritional quality of consumer’s “default” food choices.

2/ A public health priority for improved social welfare to eliminate serious health inequalities and food poverty.

3/ The tighter regulation of food health claims and greater corporate accountability.

4/ A recognition at Government level of the social and cultural values of food, allowing consumers to eat good food with dignity and not treat foodstuffs as medicine.

At the heart of the practical problems in personalizing the pursuit of a healthy diet is the lack of proper information on and around the foods we eat. Food labeling is at best confusing and at worst deceptive, so even if consumers wish to construct a healthy diet package on what basis do they do so? Many large food corporations are actively engaged in “misinformation” in the marketing and labeling of their products.

The Food Ethics Council report picks up on three key points:

a/ Healthier junk – Very fatty, sugary and salty foods such as soft drinks and crisps are labeled as junk food. But you can buy versions of the same kind of foods that contain less of such unhealthy ingredients – diet drinks and low fat, unsalted crisps. Is “healthy junk” an improvement on “junk, junk” ?

The public health argument behind such moves is that it is easier to change the make up of food products than to change consumer behaviour.

In the United States dietary health pressures have seen the ready meal market improving its nutritional profile rather than a move away from ready meals to greater use of basic, healthy ingredients and home cooking.

b/ The single-serve solution – Functional foods may benefit a proportion of the people who eat them. They range from innovations such as Benecol – a spread containing plant sterols that can lower body cholesterol levels – through to Heinz tomato ketchup. This food icon has now has a marketing facelift in the United States with the strap-line – “America’s favourite source of lycopene”. This is accompanied by the statement that “Lycopene may help reduce the risk of prostate and cervical cancer.”

c/ Much of the food industry’s approach to personalization mirrors the Government’s own approach to public health in that it treats food as medicine. The personalized marketing goes hand in hand with a focus on wellness. Indeed the likes of Nestle, Unilever, Danone and Kraft are all busy reinventing themselves as “wellness” companies.

Nestle’s head of nutrition recently explained that his ambition was to move the company “from an agrifood business to an R and D driven nutrition, health and wellness company”.

In his analysis of the Food Ethics Council report, Dr Michael Fitzpatrick - a GP and health policy author – says that politicians are desperate to seek ways of showing they care about people’s welfare and have hit on health in general (and food in particular) as the means of contact. And yet, he says, as “Getting Personal” points out, their current approach reduces the social activity of eating food to a personalized quest for individual survival.

“It implies that disease is the universal default status and that health can only be maintained by the scrupulous pursuit of an ascetic lifestyle.” He concludes that by medicalising diet the Government is pursuing an intrusive and moralistic policy set to diminish personal autonomy. “It is more likely to make people ill than improve public health.”

Another doctor, Professor Martin Wiseman of Southampton University is depressed by the lack of real progress in UK nutrition policy over the last 20 years. He bemoans the lack of a nutrition section in the Department of Health. His central criticism is that a personalized diet agenda cannot be divorced from the rest of an individual’s lifestyle – in essence if you take plenty of exercise you can virtually eat what you like.

Genetic issues also impinge on the food personalization debate. The emerging science of nutrigenomics is the study of how genetic and cellular processes relate to individual nutrition and health. Within both the public and private sectors, nutrigenomics are seen to promise an individualized approach to public health, based on the principle that we all have a unique genetic make up and metabolism and therefore a unique requirement for a nutrient and food mix.

Already commercial tests are being offered to match genetic fingerprint to diet and nutrition plan, though no companies offer them in the UK at present. Researchers at the Nuffield Trust and at Cambridge University say that at present there is no evidence to support clinical applications involving individual dietary advice based on such gene testing.

Elm Farm Research Centre welcomes the debate flowing from this Food Ethics Council report. EFRC is engaged in food policy reform through its involvement with Sustain on such issues as child obesity and school dinner provision and ingredients, as well as in its pursuit of organic goals.

Our policy is to work towards the national provision of healthy, wholesome organic food, locally sourced at affordable prices and to educate (or re-educate) consumers about food choice and buying, preparation and cooking.

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