

# Food and nutrition labelling as a nutrition education tool: understanding, perspectives and practices of South African dietitians – reading without comprehension (understanding)

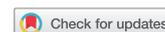
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The Global Burden of Disease Study group recently stated that poor-quality diets are now the leading cause of disease worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Consumer education by means of food product labelling can guide the consumer decision-making process, encourage consumers to make informed healthier food choices, and thus help to alleviate the burden of disease. Food labelling can also assist producers to promote their products based on the nutritional benefits that they offer. However, consumers' understanding of labelling and what this means to them may hinder the good intentions of accurately crafted labels. A label is a producer's main form of communication with consumers and can sway a consumer to either consume or reject a food product.

The changing food system inevitably leads to continuous changes of labels. In addition, the growing number of required label elements make food labels progressively busy, which can lead to producer and consumer confusion. Due to changes in the food system, regulatory changes are inevitable. Unfortunately, in South Africa we are experiencing labelling legislation changes at a rate that is faster than industry role players can keep up with. After numerous consultations and corrections, the 'correct' version of the Draft Labelling Regulations was published in May 2023. This new draft regulation (R.3337) differs substantially from its predecessors, R.429 and R.146. In view of all these changes it may be prudent to question whether all these new label elements are beneficial and impactful in the quest to inform consumers and guide food choices.<sup>2</sup>

Dietitians have various roles to play in society, but one of the main sustainable functions of the dietetic profession is to educate consumers on how to read, understand and interpret labels to make sustainable informed decisions regarding the food they consume.<sup>3</sup> It is unavoidable that a great deal of legal jargon accompanies changes in labelling practices and legislation. Consequently, it is essential that dietitians should be well versed in what these changes mean and how they can affect both them and their patients. It would, however, appear that dietitians are mostly being left behind when it comes to further education relating to the legal implications of labelling regulations. The most relevant findings of the study by Chin and co-workers<sup>4</sup> in the current issue of the SAJCN are that a high percentage (86.9%) of South African dietitians registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCA) were aware of labelling regulations and codes, but only one-third (32.1%) felt knowledgeable, 53.3% had confidence in their knowledge of nutrition information that is permitted on labels, and 54.7% felt that they understood the

mandatory requirements that govern food packaging information. This 'awareness of' without full understanding is an echo of concern facing formal education in South Africa. The Department of Basic Education published findings of the Progress in Reading Literacy Study<sup>5</sup> in May 2023, and concluded that '81% of South African children in Grade 4 cannot read with comprehension'. The subjects participating in these two studies differed, but they share the problem that they read messages without fully understanding what such messages mean.

The Chin *et al.* study<sup>4</sup> also identifies many additional barriers to the use of food and nutrition labelling as a nutrition education tool by HPCA dietitians working with the South African public. These barriers include audience illiteracy, lack of education to understand labels with regard to both the educators and their clients, hierarchy of needs that drive food purchasing behaviours (price of food is cited as the prime motivation to buy or not to buy, no matter what labels state or do not state), scarcity of time and lack of exposure frequency to label education sessions, lack of trust and actual mistrust of attempts to educate the public about favourite foods, label information overload, lack of standardised portion sizes and confusion. These barriers are cited by both the public and the dietitians who participated in the study conducted by Chin and co-workers.<sup>4</sup>

In essence, then, the primary role of food labels is to communicate product information to consumers and to assist producers to sell their products. If applied correctly, they also have great potential as an educational tool to improve nutrition and health outcomes of the population at large. The communication that takes place on food labels can be of vital importance to both the food producer and the consumer. If used correctly, the simple interface of a label and its extrinsic cues can influence consumer purchasing decisions for the better. Proper education remains a prerequisite and, as is pointed out in the survey, so is continued education on the subject.

How such education can be achieved is, as yet, unclear. However, the formulation of the SA Food-based Dietary Guidelines (FBDG),<sup>6</sup> and the Paediatric FBDG published in 2013,<sup>7</sup> could act as a touchstone. It was concluded as a cooperative and consultative process between the Nutrition Society of South Africa, the Association for Dietetics in South Africa, the Department of Health, the Medical Research Council, academics, food-producer organisations and United Nations

agencies. In similar fashion, cooperation between academic institutions has produced the South African Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.<sup>8</sup> These cooperative endeavours could act as prototypes for large-scale teaching of dietitians and other health professionals who use food labelling for educational purposes, so as to ensure that, in relation to food labelling, 'reading and comprehension go hand in hand'.

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