

SEVENTH MEETING OF THE HIGH LEVEL GROUP ON NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

**3RD DECEMBER 2009
10.00-12.30**

CHARLEMAGNE BUILDING (ROOM JENKINS)
Rue de la Loi 170, B- 1040 Brussels

MINUTES

1. INTRODUCTION BY THE COMMISSION

This is a time of EU institutional change and renewal. If the proposed College of Commissioners is approved, the current Health Commissioner, Mrs Vassiliou will take over the portfolio dealing with sports and education. The new Commissioner designate for health has experience of health policy and promotion and prevention are already on his agenda. These are positive signs about a renewed political commitment by the new Commission to continued work on nutrition.

The minutes of the meeting of July 2009 were approved and adopted.

2. OUTCOMES OF LAST PLATFORM MEETING

Three key issues were discussed:

- improving the monitoring process: although some higher scores for monitoring were achieved, the results are still below average.
- evaluation of the Platform: this process has begun and should be finalised in time to be included in the Progress report on the EU Strategy which is due by the end of 2010.
- Platform commitments on marketing and advertising.

3. REFORMULATION INITIATIVES

The tipping point on reformulation is quickly approaching. The meetings with stakeholders and increased messages from national Ministries are beginning to make a difference. There are several Member States where the need to reformulate is still not accepted by the food producers, but the work being done on salt and by the Council is helping to create a consensus on change.

3.1. REPORT FROM SALT IN BREAD MEETING 21. OCTOBER 2009

The participants were national level experts, bakery sector and NGOs. The presentations looked at the technical issues of reformulation and learnings from national experiences of salt reduction initiatives. In the discussions with the industry, some concerns were raised – too rapid changes may drive consumers away from bread and the question of competitiveness. Overall the consensus is that the technology problems can be solved. The yeast association has committed to improving their product range to assist with baking challenges. The salt industry indicated that a broader approach than just one nutrient is necessary. The plant bakers said they welcome an EU approach if the process is stepped, slow and feasible. The smaller bakers were more reluctant on the science and on the processes but were prepared to collaborate.

It was agreed to have a general move in the same direction: no single food item should be stigmatised, logos and signals to consumers about the salt reduction could be used. A follow up meeting with the national associations from SMEs has reduced concerns about the science. National associations in a number of countries are working on salt reduction while others are still hesitating or not convinced. Some national associations are prepared to reduce salt in return for stronger messages from health authorities about the benefits of eating bread.

The International Butcher's Confederation has sent to the Commission a paper on Salt in Meat and Meat Products, State of Affairs and Possible Reduction in a European Comparison by Professor Dr. Friedrich Bauer and Professor Dr. Karl-Otto Honikel. This is a positive move of taking action by the meats sector. Current salt levels and potential for reduction are described in this paper, in which it is stated that with meat a reduction of up to 30% could be achieved and with meat products a reduction of 10% to 20% by minimizing the addition of salt, exchanging sodium chloride for non-sodium salts and also by using additives like non-sodium salts. However, the latter alternative would require lowering the temperature in the chill chain down to the consumer's fridge or a shorter shelf life. The Commission was interested to learn from Member States that have worked with the meat sector on salt reduction about their evaluation of the points raised in the paper, such as the salt intake levels cited, the salt content of meat and meat products and the technological barriers to as well as health impacts of salt reduction.

A broader consensus has been reached on the impact of salt in diet on health status. An increased number of media articles are being published highlighting the link between salt and health as well as covering developments of the control by health authorities on salt, fat and sugar. The next trio Presidency of Spain, Belgium and Hungary will also take up the issue.

Are there any obstacles to progress at national level where the EU could help?

It is a challenge for all countries and at EU level to get acceptance of the scientific evidence on nutrition and health, even more so to get this evidence into policy particularly as the data is sometimes challenged by powerful interests. The Commission cannot act without the political support and engagement. The emerging message is that salt can be discussed also as part of a broader approach on reformulation. The public authorities need to have a consistent message about the importance of reformulation.

Spain – Analysis of urine found an average of 9.97 grams salt consumption, which is quite high. An ambitious salt reduction plan has been launched - consumer, industry and scientists have been brought together. The economic operators have been less welcoming and there is still some resistance. There are positive experiences in reducing salt in bread and this is being used to encourage other sectors. The Spanish Presidency will work on this issue and offers of help from the Commission are welcome. There is no stigmatising of salt: a study on the 12,000 types of food that are consumer most highlights the room for manoeuvre on reformulation. Saturated fats and sugars will also be studied and help direct the National plan.

France – Dialogue with industry has been initiated, although this is complex. Health experts do not have extensive knowledge of production methods and the message from food manufacturers is that there are many obstacles to achieve the health goals. However, an analysis by category and type of product shows a huge variation of salt content. This means it is possible to produce a lower salt product. Of course, some manufacturers may have specific issues and challenges and here is where the public authorities can help to share technology and to generate the research results that help SMEs to make it easier for them to engage. Surprised that producers doubt in 2009 science about salt – health link, which is beyond doubt.

Italy – Informing consumers and persuading them to adopt a healthier way of life is challenging. The 'Mediterranean diet' is an important element. Bread-makers have said that they are prepared to change their baking methods, and the association has made a firm commitment for action. In the meat industry a similar discussion is taking place, however there is less willingness to participate. Reluctance is linked to consumer acceptability and the implications for the global exports of meat products. Data shows that salt has been reduced by about 18 % in some meat products but the industry is reluctant to go much further, particularly because of technical and preservation issues. This is a difficult sector, EU assistance could provide added value on sustainability of the initiatives at National level.

Austria – The bakery sector has been very positive about the reduction of salt, but this may be because the issue has not filtered down yet from the trade association to the individual bakers where more reluctance is expected. This may be due to an information gap - the bakers don't know what is expected to achieve and they are not aware of the health problems from too much salt. Our experience is that we have to pass these messages about the health consequences clearly to the grassroots level in order to get results. This will take time in Austria and is not a 1-2 year process, bakers fear about their competitiveness. Some opinions were voiced in the discussions that a legislative framework would be needed to ensure that it applies across the board to everyone. On the issue of meat products, the discussion have not got very far. Assistance from the Commission with the European industry bodies and consumer groups provides a role model for national organisations.

Sweden – Debate has started with the meat industry and they echo the concerns raised in other countries. The question of greenhouse gases has been raised, if temperatures in the meat preparation process can be lowered, this saves energy which is a key goal. Hopefully the environment and health issues can go hand in hand. In bread, the problem is the sugar in bread rather than salt. There have been discussions with the restaurants and canteens where there is a possibility to reduce salt. In 2010 an eating habits survey is planned.

Denmark – A dialogue has been started with the bread, dairy and meat industries. Salt contents in soft cheeses is a challenge because it is a vital ingredient but the industry is responsive to the idea of change. The meat industry will also engage and share results in a few years of how low they can go and maintain safety. They have already been working for a few years on salt because they are big exporters to the UK where the retailers have been demanding lower salt products. The bakery sector is resisting because they have been under pressure recently to use more wholegrain and they have said it is not possible to do this and cut salt at the same time. The role of the Commission is to have a consistent message about all countries working on the same issue, local industry is very concerned about their competitiveness and positioning vis-a-vis other countries and producers.

Finland – The bread industry has responded well and has long been engaged on salt reduction. But imported products are an increasing problem, there is a lot more frozen dough being brought in and baked on the premises. This bread is popular and is often very salty but is not labelled. Here, action on EU level is needed. The meat industry have also been a partner and they were surprised at the figures produced in the study that was distributed, the Finnish producers say that salt does not have to be high for their products. In order to use the healthy logos, the current upper limit for salt is 1.7 g to use the health logo and consumers are complaining it is too salty. The current challenge is working with workplace canteens, new guidelines have just been publicised on fat, sugar, sat fat and fibre.

Ireland – A pan-European approach is useful with shared benchmarks and targets. The UK is Ireland's biggest food market, so a close collaboration with the UK government has helped to cut the salt levels in bread. A category approach has been constructive. The Department of Agriculture has

mobilised funds to research technical solutions to cut salt. The workplace and restaurants are the new focus, but the economic crisis impact on eating out has meant that the restaurant sector has less room for action on salt reduction.

Slovenia – On 1 January, the national food industry will create a working group on reducing fat, sugar and salt. Bread has been the first lesson on how the public authorities can work with private industry. A planned information campaign, which the industry was waiting for, has not yet taken place because of financial limitations. Guidelines for the catering sector have already been prepared. Discussions on cutting salt in meat and dairy have not started yet. Inequalities are a focus; the government is reviewing data on food patterns per socio-economic groups.

Portugal – There have been two initiatives: self-regulation in central Portugal has aimed to cut salt by 50%. This helped to raise awareness in the Parliament and contributed towards a law to cut the salt levels nationally by 50%. The bakery sector has been very accepting of the salt reduction initiatives. In the context of the national platform on obesity, the food industry have signed a commitment on reducing marketing to children and salt levels in food.

United Kingdom – In response on how the Commission can assist, the issue needs to stay high on the agenda. Food companies reformulate all the time and it is important to maintain consistent messages for those responsible for re-thinking a product on what investments to make to improve the nutritional profile of the product.

Switzerland – Reformulation work has started with monitoring (24 hour urine analysis) and there has been a conference on voluntary measures by the industry. The national programme 'Action Sante' addresses salt, fat and sugar in many products. One in seven Swiss (1 million people) eat their lunch at work canteens so a new focus is how to improve quality of canteen food and see where salt is added at which points in food preparation and how this could be reduced.

Spain - Informed that there is a Council initiative on salt and hopes to get support for its approval.

The **European Salt Action Network** recently held a meeting in Malta to share experiences of Member States, notably Spain, Slovenia and Switzerland. The group has created a protocol on how to do a urine collection and analysis, which national authorities are encouraged to use to ensure a uniform methodology. This initiative which began in WHO Europe has now been replicated in the WHO Americas region and colleagues from WHO Singapore are interested in creating a similar Western Pacific region initiative. The UK and Finland are being used as role models for national efforts in other parts of the world.

DG SANCO:

The timeline agreed is that that the first reporting was due back to SANCO by the end of 2009. A template will be sent from SANCO to Member States in early 2010 to ask for an update and additional information to share what has happened in the previous 12 months.

It is positive that the incoming trio presidency, the European Council and WHO Euro are all moving in the same direction. To agree on the principal is already one step into the right direction. The first half of 2010 will be used to get consensus to move in the right direction, not only to agree to move. Faster progress would be desirable but there are hesitations about taking a legislative route at EU level even if some countries have used this tool. In terms of ambition, this is the important message for stakeholders. A new element is the suggestion that if progress can be mapped and made visible, this

would be useful to show stakeholders that efforts are being shared across Europe. The Commission could help through :

- A scoreboard showing the degree of organised movement by Member State,
- Sharing information on the variability in the current levels in key products because it provides a real world demonstration of what can be achieved.

The small and medium sized enterprises have been told that if a debate at national level in a specific sector needs input from the academic community to raise their understanding of the health impact of salt this can be arranged. There may be legitimate doubts about the science and the technical issues of how to do things different and the EU can assist by helping to clarify matters. Doubts about science and technology can be used sometimes as an excuse or just ignorance and we should work to take out barriers one by one.

There must be a clear benefit for the economic operators, either through a 'praise' tool and potentially a more encouraging health message for the food items. The trap to avoid is any perception of an attempt to harmonise food or diets across Europe, but the focus is to drive salt levels down. A European level discussion on reducing salt in meat products along the same lines as those with the bakery sector would be useful.

3.2. REPORT FROM EXPERT WORKSHOP MEETING THE 10 NOVEMBER 2009 AND PRESENTATION OF DISCUSSION CONSOLIDATED “REFORMULATION” PAPER
Stephanie Bodenbach, DG SANCO

At the expert meeting on reformulation, EFSA draft scientific opinions on dietary reference values in relation to sugars and fats were presented and discussed as one scientific basis to base actions on. When discussing possible approaches, the question whether to start to work simultaneously with the salt initiative and on multiple nutrients was answered positively by the group of experts. The focus should lie on EU-wide public health problems, while flexibility to shape national initiatives should be maintained. A number of issues were raised in the discussions, which need to be developed further. Although actions on nutritional elements other than salt could be worked on in a framework approach, some different additional elements may have to be considered, such as cultural issues, international food standards and the need to consider a bigger role of behavioural changes in the initiatives.

The proposal of the expert group to the High Level Group is firstly, to agree to work together on reformulation of further nutrition elements other than salt; secondly to agree on nutrients to focus on across the EU, proposed are saturated fat linked with trans fat, where the replacement, if a fat substance at all, would be either mono- or polyunsaturated fats, energy intake or density, looking specifically at total fat, added sugars (in beverages), and portion sizes, however, enough flexibility for national adaptations should be ensured; and thirdly to agree on the development of a framework for national initiatives for those elements. The HLG did not raise objections to those proposals developed at the expert meeting in November.

Further steps would include to decide on food categories, look into benchmark setting, elaborate on replacement strategies, identify relevant food standards and cultural issues, work on the scope of awareness raising necessary. The Commission announced that a questionnaire including those and further issues will be sent to the High Level Group members in the beginning of 2010 in order to gain a better overview on the situation and opinions of Member States and in order to serve as a background for discussions of the combined experts/ High Level Group meeting in February 2010.

3.3. THE FRENCH STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THE NUTRITIONAL QUALITY OF FOODS- *MR Michel Chauliac, French Government*

The problem of obesity will not be solved through the actions of consumers alone, we need to work on the social environment and the commercial space. Information and awareness campaigns, getting vending machines out of school have helped. The next step is a document, created by the public authorities, which sets out the key elements that are critical for public health and this is offered to the industry as a basis for them to decide on which voluntary actions to take. However, the industry has been told that their commitments will be scrutinised and they must work on food items that cover 2/3rds of their production.

Industry has to make commitments that are clear, objective, dated and ready to be controlled. An independent, external organisation has to be identified as guarantor for the delivery of progress. The industry has to make a commitment for action in their own area of competence and their own products. The government has also identified specialists drawn from the public sector in nutrition, food technology, marketing and food economy which can advise and review the commitments.

France has also created an 'Observatory on Food Quality (Oqali)', which surveys improvements on products put onto the market in terms of food composition, portion sizes and cross checks this against socio-economic data. The government seeks to encourage improvement in food items that are outside the existing range of products promoted for a healthy lifestyles, e.g; soft drinks. This process has forced companies to examine the way that they actually produce their products, with the effect of rebalancing the research department versus the marketing department, which is now required to take into account more of the production issues.

Conclusions

It is agreed that reformulation efforts are an important element in nutrition policy and efforts should continue. The issue will be on the agenda of the next HLG meeting on 10 February and relevant experts will be invited to join part of the meeting.

The Spanish Presidency will present Council Conclusions on Salt in June 2010. Within the agreed priorities of the trio Presidency, Hungary will present Council Conclusions on fat and sugar reformulation.

4. A.O.B

4.1. PROVISIONAL CALENDAR FOR 2010 AND WORK PROGRAMME

The calendar of meetings has been approved.