

"Salty food – a taste to die for?"

Aoife White. European Voice, Vol. 11 No. 18, 12 May 2005

EU salt producers are fighting to overturn sodium chloride's unhealthy image and 'unjustified' campaigns designed to cut consumption that they claim are based on faulty science, writes Aoife White.

Salt is a killer, according to Professor George McGregor, an expert on blood pressure and chairman of the UK-based Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH). Salt, he said, causes high blood pressure, heart attacks, strokes, stomach cancer and kidney disease.

But salt producers are fighting back. The salt lobby group EUSalt is organising a conference in Brussels on 19 May on salt and health which will hear from scientists about the dangers of not eating any salt.

"Consumers should be protected from panic-mongering," said EUSalt's Robert Speiser, describing calls for a reduction in salt consumption as "unjustified".

Speiser said that he wanted to show policymakers scientific data showing that salt is safe. "This science should not be neglected. It is not recommended to cut down on salt intake. For old and pregnant people a lack of salt can cause severe problems." Regulators are not looking at all the data available, he said, arguing that healthy people could not eat too much salt and that the body would safely process 30 grammes a day.

McGregor scoffed at these claims. "If the salt industry persists with this rubbish they will be responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people across Europe," he said. He compared them to tobacco lobbyists who claimed that cigarettes were safe in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

He said that UK efforts to cut average salt intake would save 35,000 lives a year in the biggest improvement in public health since the introduction of clean water.

Experts in high blood pressure recognise a clear correlation between high salt intake and heart disease. Portugal leads Europe in both camps. Finland pioneered a cut in salt levels and has reported a 40% reduction in the incidence of strokes over the last ten years. The British Food Standards Agency's (FSA) campaign to cut salt aims for a 6g a day limit.

But Speiser said the British anti-salt campaign was "extreme". He said that Germany had chosen not to list salt as a danger to health and that US attempts to cut salt levels had not resulted in a major improvement to public health.

CASH argues that the salt producers are running scared. "The reason they are so nervous is that when the level does come down so will the number of deaths from heart disease," said CASH spokesperson Wendy Jarrett.

“The rest of countries in the world will follow suit.” McGregor claims salt producers are worried about losing profitable sales to the food industry, which he says makes up 40% of their revenue. Tamsin Rose, general secretary of the Brussels-based NGO European Public Health Alliance, said the main reason salt was present in most processed food was “to extend shelf life”.

With heart disease now ranking as Europe’s leading cause of death and salt one of the main suspects, the food industry’s use of salt is being questioned.

But there is no nutrition policy at a European level and no EU recommendation for how much salt we should eat. Rose said political and cultural issues had blocked attempts to harmonise dietary guidelines. Even cautious EU attempts to harmonise national laws have run into significant difficulties in the European Parliament. Last year, the European Commission suggested a ban on advertising foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt as ‘healthy’. Lollipops, yoghurts and breakfast cereals were all in the firing line.

But Commission officials walked straight into “massive lobbying” from the food industry, said Rose. In April, the Parliament’s environment committee took out a section on nutrition profiles at the heart of the proposal on health claims. The Commission wanted to introduce nutrition profiling to distinguish between healthy and less healthy foods. These profiles must be backed by scientific evidence, work which still needs to be carried out – probably by the EU agency the European Food Safety Authority.

The ostensible purpose of the Commission’s proposal, its fight against unscrupulous advertising, may have been lost in a debate over products containing ‘good’ fats, like olive oil and those with ‘bad’ ones such as lard, but MEPs are to vote on the report in plenary on 25 May. A question mark still hangs over nutritional profiling with speculation that the Commission and the Parliament could still strike a compromise. The Commission is to weigh into the debate again with a Green Paper on its overall nutrition and health strategy, to be launched in the autumn.

Next year that will be followed by a long-awaited proposal on nutrition labelling. Officials want food labels to be easier to understand. Salt might be labelled as salt, instead of sodium chloride.

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