



Letter to the editor of the European Voice

We are a coalition of European health and consumer NGOs – EPHA, EHN, PGEU, EURO CARE and EURO COOP – concerned about the 25 May European Parliament vote on the Regulation on health and nutritional claims made on foodstuffs, a proposal important for citizens given growing public interest in healthy eating, and of interest to the food industry which uses health and nutritional claims as marketing tools. There is still widespread misunderstanding about the purposes, scope and implications of this regulation, something demonstrated by the 21 April vote of the EP Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety which deleted a key provision (article 4) for public health and consumer protection.

There are currently no harmonised EU rules to ensure scientific accuracy and appropriateness of health and nutritional claims, resulting in many generic, vague and ambiguous claims that can be confusing for consumers. The regulation is therefore to be welcomed as it sets clear parameters across Europe for health and nutritional claims to permit only those that are scientifically substantiated with the ingredients referred to present in a significant amount. This Regulation also strictly regulates the use of health claims on certain products such as on alcoholic beverages. Europe has the highest per capita alcohol consumption in the world which brings a heavy health and social cost, the only responsible health message must be to reduce alcohol consumption; no alcoholic drink should carry a health or nutrition claim that might encourage people to drink it.

A crucial element of, article 4 is the requirement for food products wanting to make health and nutritional claims to meet nutritional criteria known as a “nutrient profile”. Nutrient profiles are not a new concept; they are currently used in the United States, are under development in some European countries, and are recognised by the WHO as part of a comprehensive strategy on nutrition and physical activity to help combat obesity, cardiovascular diseases and other lifestyle-related illnesses.

It is essential to underline that because health and nutritional claims are entirely voluntary, no products will be taken off the shelves by the use of nutrient profiles as a pre-condition for

european public health alliance a.i.s.b.l.

39-41 rue d'Arlon B-1000 Brussels Belgium. Tel. +32 2 230 3056 Fax +32 2 233 3880

Email epha@epha.org Website www.epha.org



claims. Products not meeting the requirements of nutrient profiles can still be sold and marketed in multiple ways including as 'improved flavour', 'tasty' etc, but not through the use of a health or nutritional claim, so it would not be possible, for example, to label ice-cream (high in fat and sugar) as "high in calcium to help reduce the risk of osteoporosis".

Finally, we think health claims must be subject to a prior authorisation system, allowing the competent authority (European Food Safety Agency) to evaluate a claim to ensure it is scientific substantiated, accurate and not misleading, before the product bearing the claim is put on the market. Prior evaluation ensures consumer protection, but would not prevent a food manufacturer from selling a product, merely from marketing it with the health claim. The same cannot be said for a notification procedure, regrettably supported by the European Parliament, which merely obliges food producers to notify the presence on the market of a food product bearing a health claim.

Our worries are growing after three European Parliament Committees, including the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety committee whose mandate is to protect the public health of European citizens, have watered down the nutrient profiles provisions. The fact that the Commission, the Council, and some large food companies support nutrient profiles, and other countries already use this concept leaves the EP isolated.

We sincerely hope that in the plenary vote on 25 May, MEPs will take the opportunity to show by preserving the coherence of the Commission proposal that the elected representatives of EU citizens are indeed there to defend citizen's interests.

Signed by: European Public Health Alliance, European Heart Network, EUROCOOP, EUROCARE, Pharmaceutical Group of the European Union.

european public health alliance a.i.s.b.l.

39-41 rue d'Arlon B-1000 Brussels Belgium. Tel. +32 2 230 3056 Fax +32 2 233 3880

Email epha@epha.org Website www.epha.org