Superfoods under the microscope

Australia and New Zealand's food industry watchdog is considering a new code that would allow food growers and manufacturers to make health claims about products provided they can support them with scientific evidence.

It will be harder for manufacturers of foods high in salt, fat and sugar to make selective health boasts.

Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) will complete its first report into the proposal in April. The move has been cautiously welcomed by consumer groups and food manufacturers, particularly those producing super foods.

Under current legislation, it is illegal to make a claim on a food linking it to the reduction of risk of a serious disease, apart from folic acid reducing the risk of neural tube defects.

The proposed framework will use published peer-reviewed research to ensure there is strong evidence before permitting a claim and any food will have to go through a FSANZ's nutrient profiling calculator to ensure claims are not made about unhealthy foods.

Greg Jardine, technical director of health food group Dr Red Nutraceuticals, said food scientists had recognised the health benefits of certain foods for years.

"A lot has happened in food research over the past 20 or 30 years but the law hasn't changed," Mr Jardine said.

"We may well have research which irrefutably shows a certain food can help with a certain condition but currently we are not allowed to say that.

"We have had the technology to reduce blood pressure using food for the past five or six years but we can't communicate that. It is highly restrictive."

He said the new FSANZ code would lead to better scientific studies as food manufacturers would have to prove their claims using evidence-based research.

Vegetable growers body Ausveg supports the new proposal, providing FSANZ endeavours to ban misleading claims.

"Generally, we welcome liberalisation in this area as the consumption of vegetable products assists in reducing the incidence of type 2 diabetes and obesity in the community, products like margarine assist with cholesterol, and chewing gum has recognised dental benefits," said an Ausveg spokesman.

"We would hope that the authorities remain vigilant, however, when considering spurious health claims, and such claims should continue to be prevented under the Deceptive and Misleading Conduct provisions of the Trade Practices Act and, if necessary, offenders should be prosecuted by the ACCC."
Dr Ken Harvey, of La Trobe University's School of Public Health, said evidence would need to be closely monitored by FSANZ.

"Often there is great dispute between what some sponsors of food medicines regard as appropriate evidence and what scientists regard as appropriate evidence," he said.

"Some manufacturers might regard a cash-for-comment testimonial as perfectly appropriate evidence but most scientists will disagree. Clearly there is this question of what constitutes good evidence."

A big problem with current labelling laws regarding health claims is they are not well enforced.
"The food-medicine interface is fraught with all sorts of problems," Dr Harvey said.

"In theory the rules are clear. You can't make health claims about food unless they have been checked out by FSANZ.

"In practice, people can and do and policing that is left to the state departments of health, and the states have often got what they see as more important things to do."

University of Southern Queensland biomedical sciences professor Lindsay Brown said clearer regulations would make it easier for consumers to distinguish snake oil salesmen from the legitimate manufacturers.

"There needs to be a strict definition of super foods," he said. "What makes them super? Where is the evidence-based research into their properties? Or is it just rubbish? We need to separate the anecdotal from evidence-based fact."

Professor Brown has published numerous papers on foods with health benefits over the past year and has two PhD students who receive funding from Dr Red Nutraceuticals.

He believes regulation needs to go further to include intellectual copyright and benchmark quality: "Who owns the natural product? Who owns the intellectual property from that? That is something that needs to be addressed.

"The other issue which needs to be addressed is quality assurance and quality control. None of that is being discussed."

Clare Hughes, senior food policy officer at consumer group Choice, said people buying super foods would still need to be wary.

"We do have a few issues with some products which are claimed to be super foods, red wine and chocolate both being good examples," she said. "Yes, they both contain anti-oxidants and a small amount of red wine is good for your heart. But that doesn't mean you should live on a diet of red wine and chocolate.

"Goji berries have had a lot of attention because of the amount of antioxidants they contain. However, we did some research and found consumers may be better off eating an apple rather than spending $50 on a bottle of goji juice."

Professor Marc Cohen, head of RMIT's wellness program, said super foods need not be expensive. "It's one of those areas where consumers don't have to buy something that's pre-packaged and pay the premium. If they like purple carrots, they can buy the seeds and grow them in the back garden."

RUTIN
Known as a glycoside, it is found in onions, buckwheat, asparagus, citrus fruits and rinds, and berries such as mulberries and cranberries.
What it does: Helps halt obesity.

CACAO BEANS
Used in chocolate, contains three neurotransmitters.
What it does: Linked with promoting a healthy mood and positive mental state.

RED WINE
Skin of red grapes and red wine contains resveratrol.
What it does: Resveratrol can slow the progress of many diseases such as cancer, diabetes, inflammation and cardiovascular disease.

GREEN TEA
Contains antioxidants.
What it does: Reduces cardiovascular diseases, cholesterol levels and the risk of obesity, fatty liver disease and insulin resistance.

PURPLE CARROTS
Ancient version of the contemporary orange carrot.
What it does: High in anti-inflammatory properties. Can help sufferers of arthritis and back pain, reduces the risk of cancer.

OLIVE LEAF EXTRACT
Antioxidant capacity almost double green tea extract.
What it does: Znti-inflammatorily properties, effective for weight loss, reducing blood pressure and preventing diabetes.

CHIA SEEDS
Native to central and southern Mexico and Guatemala.
What it does: Helps lower the risk of obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

BLUEBERRIES
Contain resveratrol.
What it does: Slows the progress of such diseases as cancer, diabetes, inflammation and heart disease.

BROCCOLI
Contains vitamin C, folic acid and carotenoids.
What it does: Enhances immune system, may prevent some cancers.

CITRUS FRUITS
Contains rutin (in the rind), high in vitamin C.
What it does: Enhances iron absorption and reduces the risk of heart attack.
Sources: The Journal of Nutrition, The University of Queensland, The Journal of Nutritional Biochemistry, Current Pharmaceutical Biotechnology, British Journal of Nutrition, J Cardiovasc Pharmacol.

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