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The **business address** of the Salt Skip Program is Queensland Hypertension Association
PO Box 193, Holland Park, QLD 4121, phone (07) 3899 1659, FAX (07) 3394 7815.
Use the **academic address** when writing about **salt control**—see the panel on page 4.

No need for political controversy

By guest contributor Dr Trevor Beard, Menzies Research Institute, Hobart

The food industry objects to *red traffic lights*, so we may be lucky if Australia gets traffic light food labels—big business commands more political attention than health does. But the industry accepts the Heart Foundation “Tick” [1] (equivalent to *amber traffic lights*), and *mandatory green and amber lights* could end the controversy (page 3). Green lights for fat and salt have enormous benefits.

Green lights for vertigo

The permanent remission from severe vertigo that most patients can achieve by avoiding the main trigger (excess salt) enables thousands of grateful patients to resume their careers and safely drive a car again (2).

The seemingly magical diet simply consists of fresh foods and low salt processed foods (sodium no more than 120 mg/100g).

Professor Paul Fagan of St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney, has made a published statement that with this diet “the number of people who come to surgery for vertigo in Meniere’s disorder has decreased dramatically” (3).

The motivated patients who get this result still do it the hard way—reading the small print of every label on every processed food.

With traffic lights every doctor could virtually abolish the vertigo of Meniere’s disorder with one sentence:

“Eat any fresh food—except seafood with no backbone (like shellfish, shrimps and prawns)—and select the processed foods with GREEN TRAFFIC LIGHTS FOR SALT”.

Green lights for hypertension

We pointed out on page 2 of the August issue (No 160) that the Heart Foundation prescribes a very similar diet for 3.7 million Australians with hypertension—“Eat low-salt and reduced-salt foods as part of a healthy eating pattern” (4).

While **Vertigo** requires a strict salt limit of 3 grams (50 mmol of sodium in a 24-hour urine collection), the Heart Foundation’s limit for **Hypertension** is only slightly less strict—4 grams of salt (24-hour sodium 65 mmol).

Reduced-salt foods (that need *amber* traffic lights) can rapidly spoil the 65 mmol result—as we repeatedly confirmed in 15 years of experience at the Menzies Institute in Hobart collecting 24-hour urine samples from every patient.

A safe and very simple rule with **Hypertension** is to choose only low-salt processed foods and eat all seafoods with the other fresh foods:

“Eat any fresh food and select only the processed foods that have GREEN TRAFFIC LIGHTS FOR SALT”.

The food industry's attack on red lights

For the benefit of new readers who didn't see this in our last issue, British breakfast cereal manufacturers withdrew their collaboration and attacked the government in 2006. "The Guardian" newspaper reported that Kellogg (UK) recruited 21 food companies in a campaign to ignore the government's voluntary traffic lights and promote "a rival industry food labelling scheme", putting it "on a collision course" between industry and government [5]. The food industry could confidently gamble on victory in a win-lose contest, knowing it is a political heavyweight that nearly always wins its fights with health [6].

The "double whammy"

Big business hates red lights (negative advertising), but the UK government served a "double whammy"—foods with red lights might no longer have access to prime time TV advertising to children [5]. An industry depending so heavily on prime time TV advertising could hardly fail to invent and promote its own substitute for traffic light labels. It would be naïve to expect the substitute to have as much potential effect on shopping behaviour as traffic lights.

The quality of the substitute

The Australian Food & Grocery Council urges all its member companies to adopt the substitute label. McDonald's Restaurants seem to expect these alarming figures to be meaningless to most customers—



- overweight people are about to eat 41% of the energy, 75% of the fat and 105% of the saturated fat in their alleged daily "requirement";
- patients with heart disease and cholesterol problems will shortly eat 105% of the saturated fat they need in a whole day;
- this single serving will give the 3.7 million Australians with hypertension 73% of the sodium they need in a whole day.

This is evidence that the company thinks three red lights (for fat, saturated fat and salt) might be more widely understood and sometimes acted upon, whereas most people will simply ignore this list of percentages.

Australia's political dilemma

For the reasons explained in previous issues of Salt Skip News, the Heart Foundation made a new recommendation in 2008 [4] that could revolutionise Australian medical practice if patients could identify low-salt and reduced-salt foods at a glance with mandatory traffic light labels.

The problem is that the food industry has introduced controversy by giving the Australian government the political dilemma of casting a win-lose vote:

- one result would inflict deeply resented red lights on some multinational food companies at the risk of driving them offshore, and
- the other would rob Australian medicine of green and amber lights and block the revolutionary advance that the Heart Foundation wants—prescribing *food first* and *drugs second*—with outstanding health and cash benefits, including lower drug costs for the 3.7 million adult Australians with hypertension [7].

How to avoid a win-lose contest

Heart Foundation policy only requires mandatory *green and amber* lights, so traffic lights lend themselves to win-win negotiation.

Legislation could *make red lights voluntary* at first, and keep them voluntary for as long as it takes to reformulate the red-light foods that have been advertised as "healthy", and let them escape red lights permanently.

Companies producing foods eligible for red lights already know they are responsible for epidemic preventable diseases, and can surely see the advantages of amicable long-term collaboration with the government, with win-win negotiation (page 3).

A win-win solution to the controversy

With a stroke of the pen Australian politicians could *make red lights voluntary and green and amber lights mandatory* for long enough to allow reformulation and save many foods from red lights—especially the popular breakfast cereals. White (colourless) lights during the voluntary period (indicating “work in progress”) would bring credit to the food industry.

Everyone would win:

- **the food industry** wins—by avoiding red lights without gambling on a win-lose vote. Red-light foods that have been advertised as “healthy” can avoid red lights permanently, because the voluntary period will be long enough to allow all of them to be reformulated. Delicatessen foods preserved with salt have not been advertised as “healthy”, but there is room for discussion (see below).
- **the government** wins—there is no political dilemma;
- **modern medicine** wins—patients with hypertension (30% of Australian adults) can reduce or remove their need for drug treatment by stopping the diet that raised their blood pressure, with enormous health and economic benefits, both to themselves and to the national health budget;
- **consumers** win twice:
 1. food labels give *all shoppers* clear and unmistakable guidance, *regardless of their age, education, income, literacy or eyesight*;
 2. “healthy” foods are more truthfully advertised.

Corn flakes

The “health” image of Kellogg Corn Flakes dates from their invention by Dr John Harvey Kellogg in the late 19th century at a Seventh Day Adventist sanatorium at Battle Creek, Michigan. In those days salt was linked with health benefits, and the food writer Michael Symons thinks that an artificially manufactured food was “considered somehow purer” [8].

In 1997 Kellogg Corn Flakes had a sodium content of 1020 mg/100g in Australia [8] (a reduction from 1100 mg/100g in 1996, when it was saltier than seawater). Comments about Kellogg cereals were published [9] with the approval of Kellogg (Aust), who deserve great credit for reducing sodium in their Australian Corn Flakes stepwise for a further decade, from 1020 to 900, 820 and then 720mg/100g (the present level). They apparently did this spontaneously for health reasons.

The present salt content would still get a red traffic light, and is six times too high for a low salt food, but voluntary red lights would allow the time for reformulation to continue.

In July 2009 two British supermarkets (Waitrose and Sainsbury) sold their home brand corn flakes with less than half as much salt (both had sodium 290 mg/100g), and the Sainsbury packet had an amber traffic light for salt. Australian Freedom Foods corn flakes are already eligible for a green light for salt (sodium 77 mg/100g), with crisp flakes that make a highly palatable accompaniment for stewed

fruit and yoghurt. Surely Kellogg could make corn flakes with amber lights for salt—they make the almost equally popular Just Right Original flakes with sodium only 30 mg/100g.

Delicatessen foods

At first traffic light labels would convert delicatessens into forests of red lights for fat, saturated fat and salt, but the feasibility of more amber lights could save delicatessens from the oblivion of the tobacconist’s shop.

Ham normally has to be salted as well as smoked as a precaution against botulism, nevertheless a green-light Australian leg ham made by Primo is low in salt (sodium 120 mg/100g) and safely sterilised by canning. The company has achieved a good flavour with potassium chloride (508) instead of sodium chloride. However those who put their health first will have to allow expensive gourmet Christmas hams to join the forgotten luxury of expensive Christmas cigars.

A Californian company sells reduced-salt (amber-light) olives, and there is probably a future for spiced low-salt olives.

NAS sauerkraut is a delicacy in Eastern Europe and perfectly safe, as it is quite sharply acid (botulism bacteria require a neutral or alkaline culture medium).

Although at present low-salt entertaining is in its infancy, we have a good prospect of amber-light delicacies that would ensure a secure future for the delicatessen.

The Heart Foundation “Tick”

SALT SKIP NEWS
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Page 4 of 4

Salt Skip Program
academic address:
Dr Jennifer Keogh
PO Box 10041
Adelaide BC
SA 5000, Australia

PHONE:
61-8-8303-8907

FAX:
61-8-8303-8899

email Salt Skip Program
Jennifer.Keogh@csiro.au

We are on the Web at
www.saltmatters.org

Salt Skip News will
continue to be distributed
in hard copy in The BP
Monitor (QHA newsletter)

People with hypertension and heart disease make a serious mistake if they choose food with the Heart Foundation “Tick”—the “Tick” is only for healthy people (like **amber** traffic lights). Sick people who want **good results** need the power of low-salt foods (**green** traffic lights). The Heart Foundation Guide says so [4].

The explanation in the box below was approved by the Heart Foundation for inclusion in a booklet written for the *Hobart Cardiac Rehabilitation Service*.

Processed foods carrying the Heart Foundation “Tick” may not necessarily comply with all the Australian dietary guidelines. Bread can carry the “Tick” for example when it is over three times more salty than bread meeting the dietary guidelines. This is perfectly legitimate when you know why—it’s because the Heart Foundation is working at two entirely different levels:

- **GRADUAL PREVENTION**—the “Tick” with steady changes for better shopping
- **ACTIVE TREATMENT**—technical advice to health professionals for best results

1. Gradual prevention

The “Tick” Program has been accused of “tinkering at the edges” with minor changes that fall far short of the radical improvements we need. But what else can it do? Radical changes would never work. The “Tick” Program would end in failure if nobody bought the food—“Tick” foods must therefore resemble the foods they replace, with changes small enough to be universally accepted.

Regular minor changes in the right direction have a cumulative effect. Small changes by millions of people can prevent a lot of illness, and paradoxically have more effect on national health statistics than more radical changes made by a smaller number of sick people.

2. Active treatment

Many of today’s consumers are motivated people who want good treatment and good results with less reliance on drugs. They deserve the best we can give them—read on. The Heart Foundation recommends doctors to prescribe low salt foods for hypertension before—and after—they prescribe any medication [4].

If they do need medication as well, staying on low salt foods will make the drugs work better at a lower dose, with fewer side effects. Low salt foods don’t fit the Australian dietary guidelines unless they comply with the legal definition of “low”.

Because the “Tick” only means “better”, the sodium content of bread that complies with the “Tick” is lower than most bread but not low enough for active treatment.

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Salt Skip Editorial Committee: Prof Michael Stowasser (Director, Hypertension Unit, University of Qld School of Medicine, Princess Alexandra Hospital, Brisbane), Sister Dianne Robson (Hypertension Nurse, Hypertension Unit, Greenslopes Private Hospital, Brisbane), Prof Caryl Nowson (Nutrition & Ageing, Deakin University, Melbourne), Clare Rawcliffe (Cardiology Dietitian, St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney), Dr Malcolm Riley (Nutrition manager, Dairy Australia), Jane Brown (Home Economist, Salt Skip Program, Hobart) and Dr Trevor Beard (Honorary Research Fellow, Menzies Research Institute, Hobart). Text drafted (edited where other authors are named) by Dr Jennifer Keogh PhD, Research Scientist, CSIRO Human Nutrition, Adelaide. Printed by Snap Printing, Edward Street, Brisbane.