**SCMP Article**

**Getting HK to go easy on the salt and sugar**

The Committee on the Reduction of Salt and Sugar in Food, which I chair, aims to encourage the community to adopt diets with less salt and sugar. We recently produced a number of recommendations for the government. They are based on the assumption that this public health issue requires long-term education and gradual changes in attitudes among the public and the food industry.

The recommendations cover several main areas. One is starting at an early age and getting the message about healthy eating to the young. And we do mean “young” – kindergarten and primary-level kids.

We also want to encourage transparency of information and overall awareness about salt and sugar levels. The idea is to help people to help themselves through such measures as better labelling for packaged food. And we hope to expand an initiative in public hospital cafeterias to inform diners of the calorie levels of different dishes. This means getting the food and catering industry involved.

Long-term change starts with the young. As well as teaching children about a healthy diet, schools are joining with health officials in a “Start Smart @ School” campaign. This recognises that the eating habits we learn at an early age can stay with us and affect our diet later in life.

This is aimed at pre-school kids and includes hands-on activities, like encouraging children and their parents to prepare meals with less salt and sugar. One of these events was a junior chefs’ cooking competition, which was a useful reminder that an educational campaign can be fun.

There is also a focus on the catering staff at pre-primary institutions, to encourage them not to use too many additives.

For most people, the labelling scheme for pre-packaged food will probably be the most noticeable of these recommendations. This will be a voluntary scheme, and labels will indicate “low salt” and “no salt”, and “low sugar” and “no sugar”. The levels for “low” are 0.12 grams per 100 grams for salt and 5 grams per 100 grams for sugar, which are Health Department standards. The idea is obviously to help consumers make an informed choice; many people say they want to eat more healthily but admit they need clearer information. But it will hopefully do more than that. Just the sight of the labels should encourage awareness among people.

The labels will need eye-catching logos, so there will be a competition before the scheme is rolled out next year. We will invite the food trade to help adjudicate in this contest – after all, we are asking them to change the design of their products and change technical and operational procedures. We hope the labels will gain recognition among consumers and encourage the food industry to offer more low-sodium and low-sugar products as part of their marketing efforts.

The calorie indication system in hospital canteens may seem a fairly minor thing, but it has the potential to go far beyond a couple of dozen cafeterias catering mainly to medical personnel. Under a pilot scheme, 80 per cent of public hospital canteens – 20 of them – are starting to display calorie counts for some of their menu items.

As with labelling, this requires cooperation from the industry. In the canteens, it means changes to things like signage and work on calculating accurate calorie figures for different recipes. There will probably be some problems that need to be ironed out. And there will be surveys to see how the information influences diners’ choice of what to eat.

But this should be worth the effort, because the potential for expanding this practice is huge. The hospital canteens are operated by the same chains that a huge number of Hong Kong office workers and other people go to all the time.

We cannot instantly change consumers’ tastes or force the food industry to change its products. But over time, we can encourage children to acquire a taste for healthier food, and we can give everyone much better information on what is in the food they choose. Hopefully, these measures will bring about a gradual change that will lead to a healthier and happier community.