



GEORGOFILI WORLD

Newsletter of the Georgofili Accademy

NUTRITIONAL PROFILES AND TRAFFIC LIGHT LABELLING: DO WE REALLY NEED THEM?

by Michele Pasca-Raymondo

June 16 2016



Some weeks ago the European Parliament clearly expressed, by a very large majority, its opposition to the European Commission's creation of nutritional profiles, under the European Regulation on nutritional and health food claims (1). This decision has been interpreted in many milieus and especially in Italy as a refusal of the by now famous English

traffic light labeling that is their direct application. The traffic light labeling has been shown to damage, by degrading their quality, the best Italian and European agrifood products (especially PDO and PGI) on sale in the United Kingdom.

Actually the Parliament has wanted to recognize the poor scientific foundation of the nutritional profiles in order to resolve the growing problem of obesity, thus repeating a judgment already expressed in 2008 by the European Agency for Food Safety (EFSA). Moreover, it has also rejected the traffic-light system in the revision of the European legislation, judging it disproportionate in cost/benefit terms.

It is at least evident that attributing beneficial or detrimental characteristics to one foodstuff or another or to one or more of its components, regardless of the quantity of portions, their impact on the overall diet, consumption frequency, and the possible presence of diseases, does not have high scientific value.

The approach pursued by the British profiles, in addition to demonizing foods with a high concentration of nutrients (and therefore the best from a nutritional point of view), would have the perverse effect of enhancing foods poor or extremely poor in nutrients.

By way of example, in the British traffic light system, whole milk, olive oil, and almost all cheeses are strongly discouraged, while replacement products, depleted or even devoid of almost all nutrients, such as diet sodas and "light" or "-free" products are strongly recommended.

The decision of the European Parliament has been strongly influenced by the effects produced by the British system, especially on a commercial level. For more than a year, these effects have been undergoing a critical examination by the Commission in Brussels. Moreover the existence, since 2011, of a specific regulation for food labeling, already provides in detail all the necessary information to the consumer to direct its decisions (2). Some "malcontents" regarding this decision certainly remain on the global stage. Among these, it is good to remember those countries that, to promote their products or distributors, or to benefit from additional financial revenue, have used or have the intention of resorting to taxes and excise duties, restrictions on the marketing or advertising of foods on the basis of various nutritional profiling systems that in the end impair fair competition. Proper nutrition essentially depends on two main factors: the amount of food taken in by the body and the balance between the quality of ingested nutrients that, because of these two factors, must be in relation to the actual individual needs of men and women taking into account the level of physical activity, the presence of disease, or the need for prevention of the same.

Today it is easy to see that almost nothing is done to limit the amount of food eaten, even in relation to the reduced energy expenditure of our times, which instead should be the main concern for controlling obesity and other disease situations. On the contrary, as regards the type of foods, uncontrolled and excessive communication phenomena are observed, especially in new media, which debate food's quality with poor scientific evidence, with the demonization of essential nutrients and the promotion of others that are less nutrient and that anyway distance themselves from healthy eating that must be varied and balanced. Nor must we forget that this balance should be calibrated by experts, based on the individual situation of each of us.

For everyone's good health and to avoid many of the current media tendencies, it is essential to vigorously relaunch a correct nutritional education and a healthy lifestyle, from an early age, especially in school, creating a base of sound information to enable every individual to distinguish between correct messages and disreputably affected messages.

-
- (1) Regulation 1924/2006
 - (2) Regulation 1169/2011