**National Salt Awareness Day 2005**

Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH) launched the 6th National Salt Awareness Day on Wednesday 26th of January, 2005. The theme for the day was the older population; this group was chosen because they are at greater risk of having a heart attack or stroke compared with the general population, Furthermore, the older population benefit immediately from reducing their salt intake by seeing a fall in blood pressure, and hence a reduced risk of developing heart disease or a stroke.

The main event was held at the House of Commons, between 12.15 and 3pm. There were around 100 guests including representatives from retailers, food manufacturers, caterers, charities, MPs, Department of Health (DH), the Food Standards Agency (FSA), media and other stakeholders.

**Presentations**

MP Debra Shipley introduced the speakers who included:
Professor MacGregor, Chairman of CASH
Melanie Johnson, Public Health Minister
Sir John Krebs, Chairman of the FSA
Barbara Gill, Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institute (NFWI)

A delicious low salt buffet was available throughout the event.

Professor MacGregor pointed out that "40% of all deaths in the UK are due to strokes, heart attacks or heart failure, and more than half the population eventually suffer from cardiovascular disease. The most important cause of cardiovascular disease is raised blood pressure, which is responsible for approximately 50% of all events. Cigarette
smoking and our high saturated fat intake are the other two major factors. The risk of blood pressure in causing strokes and heart attacks is throughout the range in adults, i.e. the higher the blood pressure (whatever the level), the greater the risk."

"Salt intake is the major cause of the rise in blood pressure with age and is, therefore directly responsible for thousands of strokes and heart attacks and heart failure in the UK. Indeed, studies have shown that if we were able to reduce salt intake by 6 grams a day taking them from 10-12g to less than 6g of salt, an achievable target in the next five years, this would prevent approximately 70,000 strokes and heart attacks in the UK alone each year, 35,000 of which are fatal."

"The majority of salt consumed in the UK is hidden in foods, i.e. the public are not aware that they are eating it. This has major advantages from a public health perspective because if all members of the food industry were prepared to reduce the amount of salt being added to food, then salt intake would fall in the UK without the public
being involved, whereas nearly all other lifestyle changes would require the public to stop smoking, increase fruit and vegetable consumption or lose weight, all of which are extremely difficult."

"Therefore, the plan for the UK to reduce salt intake over the next five years will succeed and will have major benefits in reducing cardiovascular disease and is very similar to the impact that the introduction of clean water and drains into the UK had in the late nineteenth century. For once, the UK is leading the world in public health and we need to make sure that other countries now follow."

Melanie Johnson MP

The Minster started off by congratulating CASH on the work in raising awareness of the health benefits of reducing salt intake, especially from processed foods.

"High blood pressure contributes to more than 170,000 deaths a year in England. It is estimated that reducing population intakes from 9g to 6g per day would result in a reduced incidence of hypertension by 17 per cent, coronary heart disease (CHD) by 6 per cent and stroke by 15 per cent- many early deaths prevented."

She talked about how the DH and the FSA are working together with industry to reduce the amount of salt in processed foods as well as raising awareness on salt and blood pressure with health professionals and consumers.
"We, the DH and the FSA, are encouraged by the large number of companies and organisations in the food industry who have introduced salt reduction programmes. Progress has been made by a large number of organisations but I would particularly like to single out Marks and Spencer and Heinz for the pioneering work they have undertaken in this area. Consumers are already benefiting from this and the action taken by an increasing number of retailers and manufacturers who now label products with the salt content."

"However, there is scope for further reductions and, in particular, in certain food product categories, I would urge all sectors of industry to work together with the FSA to enable more progress to be made."

The Minister finished with " Success will depend not only on what Government does, but also on securing the support and commitment of a wide range of organisations, That is why it is good to see so many stakeholder groups coming together to support today's activities."

Sir John Krebs started off by congratulating CASH and Professor MacGregor for their pioneering work that started in the 1990s.
In reviewing progress since the previous year, Sir John said: "last year I said if salt reduction was a journey from London to Edinburgh, we'd only just reached the M25. There aren't yet any detailed intake figures available to update my analogy, but I'd guess we might now be approaching Watford Gap".

He said that last year's public health campaign on salt, spearheaded by Sid the Slug, had raised awareness of the problem and that the second phase of the campaign, later in the year, was going to focus on how consumers could translate that awareness into action.

Sir John went on to say that there were many food manufacturers still not providing figures on salt: "If people are going to chose lower salt products, they have got to be able to find them first. We have written to the food industry emphasizing the importance of clear labelling of salt - for which there is consumer demand."

Sir John advised that they would be carrying out a shopping basket survey some time in the spring which would highlight the various salt contents of a typical shopping basket.

Barbara started her presentation by congratulating CASH and more recently the FSA on their work in campaigning to reduce salt consumption.
"The NFWI has been campaigning throughout its history to improve the nation's diet and health. In recent years this concern has particularly focused on the decline of practical food skills throughout the population, and the increasing health risks associated with our over reliance on processed foods, which are generally high in salt, sugar and fat."

"We very much welcome the moves taken by the food industry to date to reduce salt in their products, and hope that it won't be a matter of too little too late. Yet we are very concerned that some parts of the food industry still complain that the salt reduction targets are too harsh. Their reaction to the FSA was very disappointing. They complain that the consumer won't eat the products because they will taste too bland. Well, if they taste too bland without salt they need to be reformulated to make them tastier with less salt. If that's not possible, then perhaps we would be better off without them."

"We must send out clear signals to manufacturers that we are not prepared to put up with the current levels of salt in foods. As consumers, we will support those companies that have the courage to act, and shun those that don't. But in order to do so we need better food labelling. I would like to believe that I am food literate, but I have difficulty calculating the amount of salt in many products. We need clear labelling of salt content not sodium, and greater clarity about portion sizes. Labelling needs to be clear and consistent and if manufacturers aren't willing to take the lead in improving food labels, then the Government must."

She concluded by saying "What is certain is that we can no longer afford to sit back; we need to act now and to act decisively. The NFWI will continue to lobby to improve the nations diet and NFWI members will also continue to do so both by their actions at home and in their communities. Salt reduction is not just a matter of taste; it is a matter of improving my health, your health and the whole nation's health."

Charlie Powell from Sustain asked two questions firstly "I wonder if the Minister would agree that giving the correct message is very important. For instance, here is a can of Heinz baked beans which states that it "contains 1.3g of an adults daily recommended intake of salt." Now that suggests we should be grateful to Heinz for providing us with 1.3g of salt that we do not need. What is missing here is the FSA's word, "maximum" which if included, would lead to a completely different interpretation of this statement. I complained about this labelling to the FSA back in September as I believe such misleading statements undermine their Salt Awareness Initiative. The FSA told me that Heinz were developing a new label, but four months on it is this errant labelling which is still on the supermarket shelves."

"My second point which is most important is what the food industry as a whole does, rather than what progress may have been made by any one company. For instance, we could go into any supermarket today and without any effort find hundreds of products which contain unacceptably high levels of salt. At what stage does the Minister think that there is a role for regulation?"

Melanie Johnston responded to the first part of the question saying that she recognised the problems with labelling and more work needed to be done.

Charlie Powell's second question was "Here is an example of a product containing salt in every Asda supermarket in the country - clearly aimed at children (although it is typical of many products on the market which are targeted at the general population) as it has a colourful Mr Greedy character on the label and it clearly purports to be healthy. It claims for instance, that it is free from artificial flavours, from artificial colours and that it is GM free and yet this small single portion tin contains 4 grams of salt! Not of course that the label tells you that, because it only declares its sodium content [1.6g in the tin] and so a mother or a father trying to buy healthily for their family would have no idea that this was an inherently unhealthy product, which cannot possibly fit into a balanced diet."

"What I would like to ask John Krebs is what sanctions are available for the hundreds of manufacturers, like the one that produced this product, which repeatedly ignore the call for voluntary action?"

Sir John replied with the point that manufacturers are not breaking the law in what this manufacturer are practicing i.e. only declaring the sodium content.

Malcolm Kane of Cambridge Food Control raised the point to Sir John Krebs about food labelling targeted at children (and other special groups) where the salt content was grossly unsuitable for children and the label still proclaimed the product as specially designed for, i.e. beneficial for children.

Sir John Krebs replied that unfortunately the label was not illegal, referring to the open declaration of salt (or sodium) which was in accordance with nutritional labelling requirements. Malcolm Kane followed this up with "while that may be true, it was also the case that a label could be illegal if it was misleading. There is a very well established legal position on misleading labelling, which ultimately leads to interpretation by the Courts. But the Courts cannot initiate this or any other such legal action. This has to be done by the enforcement authority concerned, which in this case is Trading Standards. The FSA has considerable influence on Trading Standards regarding food law". Sir John Krebs agreed with this point and committed to pursue this with the relevant Agency labelling experts.

Jack Winkler from Food and Health Research asked "Would the DH be willing to undertake a name and shame strategy against those companies refusing to make salt reductions?" as many companies have been resisting changes for a long time. Melanie Johnson responded by saying that the DH would continue talking with the industry.

Nigel Murray from Losalt asked "Would the Minister give us her assurance that the Government will stay with the project of salt reduction until the 6g target is met and not be diverted or allow the campaign to falter before this objective is met?"

In response to his question the Minister replied by saying that the DH would continue with the project of salt reduction but would also be asking for sugar and fat to be reduced at a later date.

Moira Howie from Waitrose asked John Krebs "whether the traffic light labelling that was currently on the Sainsbury packs would be rolled out as the FSA preferred option?" To which he answered no.

Scott Garrett, from Heinz asked "What do the panel think that Heinz should do with the salt mountain that they have?"

Debra Shipley replied by saying that they could have an excellent publicity event with the salt mountain.

Margaret Phillips, from Help the Aged asked the FSA whether "an older person is included in the shopping basket survey, as they tend to purchase differently from a family?" The FSA replied that they would be considering this.

Professor Bob Michell, CASH member raised the point that although it is very important that the food industry continues to remove enough salt so that the nation can easily consume less than 6g per day of salt. He went on the say that "both human and animal data shows we need far less than 6g of salt per day that humans only need around 2g salt per day and in terms of evolution we only needed 0.5 g of salt. Animal studies show that most adult mammals only require 0.6mmol/kg of sodium."

Sir John Krebs agreed that once the 6g salt figure had been achieved by the food industry the salt guideline figure would be lowered further.

Professor de Wardener raised the point as to whether salt should be classified as an additive to food. Professor MacGregor replied that for historical reasons salt has, quite incorrectly, been regarded as an ingredient but when added to food salt is a chemical and should be labelled as an additive.

Many foods are now labelled as containing no preservatives or additives when they contain large amounts of added salt. It is ironic that the food industry claims that one of the main functional roles of salt is its preservative action, which seems to contradict the above. In reality, salt now very rarely plays a preservative function and it is quite easy to substitute with other chemicals. The FSA should look at this in a much more critical light, and clarify salt as an additive.

Roger Denton from the Local Authority Caterers Association asked the Minister "Why does the Minister think that institutional caterers are not currently doing anything to reduce salt levels in foods?"

The Minister replied by saying that they would be in included in consultation.

**Stands**

There were four stands which included two retailers - Co-op and Asda as well as two food manufacturers, Birds Eye and Losalt. All of them displayed literature about the work they have been carrying out on salt reduction.