

**ASSOCIATE PARLIAMENTARY
FOOD AND HEALTH FORUM**

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**Convenience Foods
Tuesday, 19 October 2004
Committee Room 16, House of Commons**

CHAIRMAN: Lord Rea

**SPEAKERS: Nick Hindle, Head of Corporate Affairs, McDonald's Restaurants Ltd
Catherine Collins RD, Chief Dietitian, St. George's Hospital**

Introduction

1. **Lord Rea** welcomed everyone to the meeting and in particular the two speakers. Noting that the first speaker is Head of Corporate Affairs for McDonald's Restaurants Ltd, he pointed to the recent release of the film *Supersize Me* featuring Morgan Spurlock. The film highlights the problems of measuring how much people eat, especially outside the home and the consequent difficulties in ascertaining robust food eating habit statistics. He invited Nick Hindle to address the Forum.

Nick Hindle

Introduction

2. **Nick Hindle** thanked Lord Rea and the FHF for the opportunity to speak about recent developments at McDonald's. He gave a brief introduction to the company, highlighting that it has recently celebrated its thirtieth year of operations in the UK. McDonald's now has 1,200 restaurants in this country, 470 of which are owned by franchisees. Altogether the company employs over 70,000 people and serves on average 2.5 million people every day.

Obesity

3. As a global business, McDonald's is able to draw on the successes and knowledge of the company in other countries, for example when facing a global problem such as obesity. The company is fully committed to playing a responsible role in helping to prevent obesity.
4. However, the issue of obesity is often overstated, and the problems this causes have been compounded by a broadening of the definition of obesity. A recent *Times* newspaper article (13.10.04) stated that $\frac{3}{4}$ of adults in the UK are obese. Most people would agree that this figure is an exaggeration.

5. McDonald's makes a point of listening to its customers and then makes changes in accordance with its visitors' wishes. Regular research into customers and their expectations is conducted and as a result the company knows that customers enjoy visiting their restaurants. Similarly the company is aware that customers believe that responsibility for their children's diet and lifestyle ultimately lies with them.
6. McDonald's has tried to engage in the debate over obesity. They have given evidence to the Health Select Committee's inquiry into obesity and the EFRA Select Committee's inquiry into nutritional information. Likewise they have worked with the Healthy Living team in Scotland and they have contributed to consultations put out by the Government and the FSA on the subject of public health and healthy active lifestyles.
7. McDonald's firmly believes that the rise in obesity rates needs to be halted, and to achieve this the food industry must be included 'at the table'.

What McDonald's has done over the past eighteen months

8. McDonald's has made changes to the way it does business and these changes fall into four loose categories: menu and formulation, advertising, nutritional information, and physical activity.
9. With regards to formulation the company's latest focus has been on salt. For example, Chicken McNuggets have 30% less salt, fries have 24% less and there is now 23% less salt in the tomato ketchup. This means that the average Happy Meal now has 20% less salt than last year.
10. The company has also expanded the menu to give customers greater choice. Examples of the new options include the following additions to the Happy Meal menu: fruit bags, organic milk and a carbonated, no-added sugar drink. However, the biggest single change to the McDonald's menu came in March this year with the introduction of the Salads Plus range, which includes a variety of salads and sandwiches plus mineral water and a fruit and yoghurt desert. This new option is selling well.
11. On the advertising front, the company has responded directly to Tessa Jowell's challenge to use advertising as a force for good. So, for example, the final frame of Happy Meal adverts now display a meal combination of Chicken McNuggets, a fruit bag and a fruit drink. McDonald's has also created a series of information commercials for children. This is a long-term commitment which is backed by a £1 million investment this year.
12. Tray liners at McDonald's restaurants now display full nutritional information and leaflets recommend meal combinations based on percentages from the RDA. The McDonald's website also has an interactive nutritional counter¹ and the company is always looking to simplify how it communicates nutritional information. It is currently researching a number of different approaches including displaying it in pictorial form.
13. In the area of physical activity, McDonald's is the Community Partner of the four home Football Associations, part of which involves the creation of 10,000 qualified community coaches by 2006. This is more than just a branding opportunity. Likewise the company is

¹ http://www.mcdonalds.co.uk/asp/ourfood/asp/ff_interactive.asp

a sponsor of the Olympics and works with the IOC. To celebrate the 2004 Olympics the company created a special Happy Meal for adults which included a salad, a diet drink and a free pedometer – one million were sold within a month.

Conclusion

14. McDonald's is changing, in line with their customers' stated wishes. Yet at the same time, McDonald's has to recognise that customers want some things to stay the same: they want to be able to enjoy the odd Big Mac from time to time.
15. McDonald's wants to see the food industry given a seat at the table for the next stage in the debate.
16. **Lord Rea** thanked Nick Hindle and invited the audience to ask any questions about the presentation [see below]. Lord Rea then invited Catherine Collins to address the Forum.

Catherine Collins

Introduction

17. **Catherine Collins** started her presentation by providing a definition for convenience foods: "an all-embracing term for food processed to make it easier to store and use" which "theoretically saves preparation and/or cooking time". She described them as a child of the early 1960s and in particular a result of research by NASA. Convenience food comes in numerous forms, including the following: dried, bottled, fresh, chilled, pre-prepared, UHT/ambient, canned, frozen, and vacuum-packed.
18. Consumers choose convenience food because of: the availability of ready meals; increased ownership of microwaves and freezers; overall decline in cooking skills; staggered meals / snacks; time pressures; working women; commuting; and higher disposable income. Research² suggests that the importance consumers attach to 'value for money' and 'food quality' are priorities whatever the income group (i.e. upmarket / midmarket / less affluent). In total, convenience foods account for 1/3 of the total food spend or £17 billion at 2003 prices.

Nutritional Concerns

19. Convenience foods present a number of nutritional concerns. They can become dissociated from 'raw' foods: for example, many children do not know the ingredients of a pizza. Moreover, the ingredients may be unexpected (a particular concern for people with food allergies or religious beliefs) and may be a health concern (they may contain high levels of saturated or trans fats and salt additives).
20. Convenience foods can also lead to 'portion distortion' and to deficiencies in fruit and vegetables which in turn lead to a high energy density of the overall meal.

² <http://www.tescofarming.com/>

Product labelling

21. 80% of UK manufactured products carry food labels and 3 out of 4 consumers read them. However, 9 out of 10 consumers find the labels hard to understand.

Alternative Diets

22. The Mediterranean Diet is recognised as the “blueprint” for healthy diet – the Cretan diet of the 1950s in particular is ideal for longevity. The features of this diet are: its simple components; wholegrain carbohydrates; at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day; modest amounts of lean meat, oily fish and low fat dairy foods; and, a modest use of mono-unsaturated fats.
23. Both the HEA and HEBS use the ‘plate model’ to encourage a healthy, balanced diet. This model visually represents healthy proportions of the food groups in the diet; fruit and vegetables; bread, other cereals and potatoes; meat, fish and alternatives; milk and dairy foods; and foods containing fat and/or sugar.
24. Cancer and heart disease account for 60% of premature deaths. Yet the WHO (1990) reports that an intake of over 400g of fruit and vegetables each day can provide protection against chronic diseases. Each portion increment reduces cardiovascular disease risks by 5%, but increases dietary cost by 12-20p. A greater intake of these foods also reduced the energy density of the diet, aiding weight control.

Energy density

25. Energy dense diets may contribute to obesity. The energy density of typical diets (per 100g) illustrate the concentrated energy content of the British diet (Prentice & Jebb, *Obesity Reviews* 2003):
 - African diet: 107 kcal
 - Healthy diet: 125 kcal
 - British diet: 160 kcal
 - Fast food outlet: 262 kcal
26. Concerns regarding portion size and energy density were illustrated in the recently released film *Supersize Me* where the lead character, Morgan Spurlock, spent thirty days eating at McDonald’s. During that time his average daily energy intake was between 5,000 and 5,500 kcal resulting in a 25lb gain in weight over a one month period.
27. Similarly, research based on 900 American women aged 21-45 monitored over a three year period identified that the 21% who ate fast food at least three times a week had a higher fat intake, a higher energy intake and gained more weight than subjects who ate less often at fast food outlets.
28. Recent research has indicated our lack of ability to control food energy intake when offered meals of different portions size and energy density, inadvertently increasing overall energy intake the larger the meal offered (Kral et al; *Am J Clin Nutr* 2004).
29. So how can nutritional messages be imparted? Firstly, health claims can be accurate, yet misinterpreted. For example, Cornflakes are as salty as sea water on a weight-for-weight

basis. However, when compared with alternative breakfasts, such as a croissant or a 'Sunrise muffin' from Starbucks, they contain a similar level of salt, yet provide much higher fat and energy intake.

30. The result is that people are confused and anxious about food choices. Products marketed as being deliberately 'bad' remain popular: e.g. a Pot Noodle is advertised as "The Slag of all Snacks", but six are sold every minute.

Health risks

31. Analysis shows that there is a link between increases in body weight and increases in chronic health problems. For example, research shows that diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure are more common-place for people with a raised body mass index.
32. Obesity has also been linked to some cancers and it can cause increased vascular (blood vessel) damage which in turn can lead to heart disease and strokes.
33. Campaigns such as 'Fear the Pie' (British Heart Foundation) make a clear and direct statement about the health concerns of pastry products – particularly pertinent research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s shows that over half the population have eaten a pastry-based pie in the preceding seven days.

The 'good' nutritional aspects

34. Convenience food can have a high nutrient density and lack wastage (e.g. frozen vegetables). It can have a lower fat/calorie content than conventional prepared foods (e.g. oven chips vs. conventionally fried chips). It can also encourage food variety and mature tastes.
35. Convenience food can have the following additional benefits:
 - Added nutrients supplementary to diet
 - Modified fibres (probiotics) for 'inner health'
 - Source of bacteria (probiotics) for 'inner health'
 - Cholesterol lowering properties

Fast food

36. Soso Whaley's experiment of eating McDonald's food for sixty days suggests that it is possible to lose weight whilst eating fast food: it depends on the choice of food consumed. Her average energy intake was just 1,800-3,000 kcals compared with Morgan Spurlock's (*Supersize Me*) 5,000-5,500 kcals.
37. McDonald's should be praised for its recent scheme of encouraging healthy practices by giving away free pedometers with their salad meals. Conversely, Cadbury's gesture in this direction required customers to eat 2,730 chocolate bars before they were awarded with one cricket set.

Conclusion

38. In concluding, Catherine Collins quoted Hippocrates in saying: ‘If we could give every individual the right nourishment and exercise, not too little and not too much, we would have found the safest way to health’.
39. **Lord Rea** thanked Catherine Collins for her presentation which he said was “packed full of information”. He then invited the audience to ask questions about issues raised during the presentations.

Question & Answer Session

40. **Baroness Miller** asked whether McDonald’s was ‘coping’ financially, with the expansion into the salad market, given that fries are more profitable than salads. **Nick Hindle** replied that the cost of food is coming down, helping to keep prices competitive. McDonald’s is selling ¼ million salads every week which demonstrates that there are items on the menu that customers want. The company sees this as a growing trend. He added that McDonald’s has a long-term commitment to providing healthier options such as salads.
41. **Dr Ian Gibson MP** asked whether there was any evidence that people are choosing salads. **Nick Hindle** said that the evidence that people are choosing salads is in the sales figures, to which **Dr Gibson** replied that he did not believe the figures. Lord Rea asked whether salads are a ‘loss leader’ for McDonald’s, which **Nick Hindle** denied and pointed to the significant increase in people trying to be more healthy but at the same time continuing to eat out. He also told Lord Rea that salads represent a growing proportion of McDonald’s sales.
42. On the subject of the calorie content of McDonald’s salads, **Catherine Collins** said that the salads are offered with or without dressing and croutons are available but have to be requested. She added that the salad dressing is too large, thereby adding to the calorie intake while also making the salad ‘wet’. **Nick Hindle** said that the company is aware of this issue and is introducing smaller sachets.
43. **Michelle Smyth (Which?)** suggested the introduction of a traffic light system for nutritional information, for example on the back of the till receipt. **Nick Hindle** replied that they have tried to provide nutritional information to the customer before they make a purchase. He accepted that providing such information on till receipts would lead to greater understanding over time but would not influence the decision at point of sale. He also gave the example of the Swedish ‘Green key’ system, which, as a national programme, is most effective. McDonald’s is currently testing the use of pictures in communicating nutritional information in the US and parts of Europe.
44. **Baroness Gibson of Market Rasen** asked if a profile of salad buyers has been conducted. **Nick Hindle** replied that the overriding indicator is that women like the salad range on its own while men like to mix it with other options from the menu. Salads are currently not on the children’s menu, but Robinson’s ‘Fruit Shoot’ is sold with 20% of ‘Happy Meals’. McDonald’s has also launched a low fat chicken roll which is marketed at men and women. **Catherine Collins** suggested that people don’t necessarily go to McDonald’s in order to ‘eat healthily’. So the message should be aimed at encouraging

customers to choose healthier options in addition to what they would normally choose from the menu.

45. **Lord Rea** asked **Nick Hindle** what oil is used to cook the fries sold in McDonald's restaurants as this can have a significant effect on the nutrient quality. He replied that the company uses rapeseed oil, but that they are currently trialling a new variant of this oil which is lower in trans-fatty acids. However, the supply of this new oil is currently not sufficient to meet demand.
46. **Sally Freeman** raised the issue of imported food at McDonald's. **Nick Hindle** responded that wherever possible the company sources its food locally. However the company's commitment to value and quality means that it also needs to source food from further afield.
47. **Lord Rea** thanked the speakers again and reminded the audience of the Forum's next meeting on the subject of 'Alcohol' to be held at 6pm on Tuesday, 30 November 2004 in Committee Room 16 (House of Commons).

Biographies of Speakers

Nick Hindle

Nick Hindle is Director of Corporate Affairs at McDonald's Restaurants. Since the company opened its first restaurant in the UK in October 1974, the Golden Arches have become a familiar symbol. However, recently it was announced that the Arches are to be dropped in favour of a question-mark. By the end of 2002 there were 1,230 McDonald's restaurants operating in the UK, representing a total investment in property and equipment of over £1.7 billion, employing over 44,000 people with a further 24,000 plus employed by McDonald's franchisees.

In March 2004 the company made the biggest change to its core menu for thirty years when it introduced its Salads Plus range. This range includes two premium salads, a side salad and a grilled chicken sandwich, in addition to mineral water and yoghurt. It complements the earlier addition of fruit bags in 2003, which made McDonald's the UK's biggest seller of pre-packaged fruit.

Catherine Collins

Catherine Collins is a Registered Dietitian (RD) who has worked full time in the NHS since graduation in 1983. She currently specialises in the fields of intensive care nutrition and rheumatology. As an active spokesperson for the British Dietetic Association she is frequently quoted in the media as an objective and impartial expert on nutrition and dietary matters. She has presented clinical research at several international conferences, and has been published widely in specialist health journals. For the last year she has contributed to the 'Behind the Label' column in *The Times* on Saturday, which evaluates the nutritional and health claims made for processed foods.

CLC, October 2004