



Leaving Us Hungry

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Food, nutrition and human behaviour are far too complex to be regulated with a star rating system

Mandatory food labelling is a bureaucrat's dream and a consumer's nightmare.

Just take the commonwealth government's health star rating system for example. It's so bad that Coles beer batter steakhouse chips receive a four-star rating (out of five). Coles execs must have a good chuckle about that one.

And that's not to say those beerbattered chips aren't delicious. They are. But hot potato chips aren't front of mind when people are considering healthy options for dinner. And imposing a labelling system that gives them a health rating of four out of five is patently absurd.

This is because the relationship between diet and health is complex.

Much more complex than the health bureaucrats who dreamt up this scheme are willing to admit.

In fact, we're still in the early days when it comes to the science of nutrition.

While simple rules can get you some of the way – for example, reducing your intake of sugar might help you to lose weight – distilling all relevant dietary information into a single fraction is impossible due to the differences between individuals.

Right now, it's apparently way beyond the government's capabilities.

An example of the stupidity of the health star rating was on display last week. Following pressure from activists – you know, the ones who just hate it when other people are enjoying themselves – Nestle took a decision to remove the health star rating from the label of Milo.

To be fair to the public health nannies, Milo did have a 4.5-star rating, which almost seems as bad as the potato wrapped in batter example. The difference, of course, is that Milo isn't designed to be eaten directly from the tin. Nestle recommends having three teaspoons dissolved in a glass of skim milk. The activists say that's not how people actually consume it in the real world. And they're probably right.

There's a multitude of ways to enjoy the popular malt powder.

I've been known to use slightly more than the recommended ratio of Milo powder to milk. And skim milk is super gross so I wickedly use full-fat milk instead.

A health star rating can't take into account the weird and wonderful ways that individuals eat Milo.

Queensland LNP senator James McGrath is perhaps Australia's most famous Milo consumer. He once lobbied McDonald's Australia for the introduction of a Milo McFlurry. But traditionally McGrath has his Milo generously sprinkled over vanilla ice cream with a nip of Bundy Rum.

If the way in which a product is consumed is an important part of the health star rating system, how does such a scheme take McGrath's consumption habits into account?

The public health activists at the centre of this inane dispute are so desperate to exert control over people's lives that they've missed the very practical point at the heart of this whole episode – it's about individuals. The key reason the health star rating system fails is that it has no way of taking individual context into account. No context of other consumption decisions. No context of natural physical attributes or exercise habits. It's simplistic and atomistic.

Sadly, I don't hold out a lot of hope that the current formal five-year review of the health star rating system will recommend the abolition of the scheme. It's more likely that, in typical government fashion, the outcome of a review into a program that doesn't work will be a recommendation that the existing framework is expanded and that more taxpayer money should be shovelled into the furnace.

It's more likely that the leadership will have to come from the Health Minister and the cabinet if the



program is to be abolished.

Because self-interested bureaucrats, who thrive on the existence of government programs whether they work or not, will never lobby for the abolition of an existing government program.

They'll never ask the question that needs to be asked: why is this dumb, expensive failure of a system still in place?

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