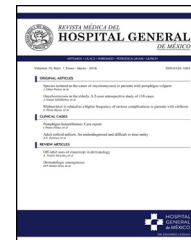




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SHORT COMMUNICATION

## The freedom to choose, eat, add and gain weight

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Received 16 January 2017; accepted 1 February 2017

### KEYWORDS

Obesity;  
Public policy;  
Consumption

**Abstract** The Federal Commission for Protection Against Health Risks (COFEPRIS) launched a regulation for new front nutritional labelling for food and non-alcoholic beverages, recommending that consumers add up their consumptions throughout the day without exceeding a hundred percentage points. The campaign has therefore been called "Add up and do not exceed 100%". The policy established by the Federal Government is based on assumptions that encourage consumption and will not solve the problem in depth. Following is a descriptive and critical argument against said policy.

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### PALABRAS CLAVE

Obesidad;  
Política pública;  
Consumo

**La libertad de elegir, comer, sumar y engordar**

**Resumen** La Comisión Federal para la Protección Contra Riesgos Sanitarios (COFEPRIS), lanzó una regulación del nuevo etiquetado frontal nutrimental en los alimentos y bebidas no alcohólicas, con la recomendación al consumidor sumar a lo largo del día los consumos sin exceder de cien puntos porcentuales, por lo que a la campaña se le ha denominado "Suma y no te pases de 100%". La política instaurada por el Gobierno Federal, se basa en supuestos que fomentan el consumo y no resolverán de fondo el problema, por lo que se hace una argumentación descriptiva y crítica de esa política.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.hgmx.2017.02.004>

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## Introduction

It would seem that, in Mexico, “grams” have been invested to combat obesity and “kilograms” have been invested to encourage the problem through market regulation policies applicable to sugary beverages. According to figures published by the National Geography and Statistics Institute (INEGI), there has been an increase in the consumption of sugary beverages among the Mexican population.<sup>1,2</sup> There has also been considerable growth in the number of convenience stores, where all the products on sale are packaged, and even classified as “junk food”. They also provide other services that “corner shops” do not, such as being open at night, tax payments, telephone charging, pharmacy, etc., creating a new market niche permitted and regulated by different State agencies.<sup>3</sup> Our objective is to present counter arguments based on a linear reality to the campaign against obesity in Mexico, not with a view to categorically rejecting State policy, but to present assumptions that need to be considered when planning, developing and implementing health policies in the federal public administration based on critical and descriptive arguments. Ultimately, we propose a reflection on the reality of contradictory health policies in a globalised world.

## Development

The Federal Commission for Protection against Health Risks (COFEPRIS) has launched a much-trumpeted advance of the new regulation for nutritional labelling on food and non-alcoholic beverages, according to which the content in each nutrient relative to the total has to be visible on the front of such products. The consumer is advised to add up consumption during the day and not exceed a hundred percentage points. The campaign has therefore been called “Add up and do not exceed 100%”.<sup>4-6</sup> This regulatory policy is based on a number of different assumptions regarding an individual’s ability to choose: (a) that all consumers are literate, (b) that all consumers know how to add figures, (c) that all consumers have the purchasing power required to buy these products every day, (d) that all consumers are able to visually distinguish the colours of the products, (e) that all consumers are conversant with and understand the conceptual function of each nutrient and (f) that all consumers base their diet solely on packaged food and beverages that can, all together, add up to one hundred points. Below is an analysis of each assumption.

### (a) All consumers are literate

Although census data show that, from 1970 to 2010, the percentage of population aged 15 and over who were illiterate fell from 25.8% to 6.9%, the 2010 Population and Housing Census shows that 6 out of every 100 men and 8 out of every 100 women aged 15 and over are illiterate.<sup>7</sup>

### (b) All consumers know how to add figures

Mexico is constitutionally committed to providing the entire population with basic education. However, nearly 32 million

Mexicans (1 out of every 3) over 15 years of age did not complete secondary or primary school. According to PISA tests, 15-year old Mexican students have a poor performance in mathematics, reading and science.<sup>8</sup>

### (c) All consumers have the purchasing power required to buy these products every day

According to the National Commission for the Protection and Defence of Financial Service Users (CONDUSEF), the average spending of Mexican children on sweets and junk food is over 20 billion pesos per year. The Commission reports that soft drink prices are not very high (12.50 Mexican pesos), but the cost of consumption per family could range from \$2400 to \$9600. Due to the above, the real average cost per litre of soft drinks is lower than that of other sugary beverages.<sup>9,10</sup>

### (d) All consumers are visually able to distinguish the colours of products

According to the INEGI, the second type of limitation among the Mexican population is the use of glasses, 27.2%.<sup>11</sup> 43.24% of the population, 48,575,560 people, require optometric services in Mexico.<sup>12</sup> Although these are isolated figures, there are other considerations to be made: the least educated do not fully understand nutritional information<sup>13</sup> and, with ageing comes a reduction in visual capacity.<sup>14</sup>

### (e) All consumers are conversant with and understand the conceptual function of each nutrient

This appears in the “nutritional information” section, which describes size per portion, energy content (the kilocalories provided by carbohydrates, proteins and fats), portions per container of pack, content in fats, proteins, carbohydrates, sodium and vitamins/minerals. This information is always provided when there is an assigned Daily Recommended Intake. This is important information, but which first and foremost is based on everyone being literate. Furthermore, they have to understand the different concepts and then make mathematical calculations based on portions per pack and energy content. In other words, there is a problem of definition and fact-related ambiguity. Unfortunately, the magnitude of this conceptualisation among the population is not precisely known. According to INEGI figures for 2010, 8.5% presented mental difficulties and 4.4% of the population presented attention deficits or learning disorders.<sup>11</sup>

In this respect, a study conducted in three countries on this continent revealed that people are familiar with the word “salt”, but not with “sodium” (the term included in nutritional information), that more salt and sodium are consumed than is reported and that there is no prospect of reduction.<sup>15</sup> Similar results were found in Spain in 2010.<sup>16</sup> In Mexico, a study conducted in six cities in the northern, central and southern regions showed that only 17% of people choose food based on nutritional labelling and that 49% do not understand the information contained on rear nutritional labels.<sup>13</sup>

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