

Report of Symposium on Salt and Health in the Western Pacific Region

February 13, 2010, Manila, Philippines

Purpose and scope of the meeting

The symposium was organised to:

- share international experience on sodium reduction schemes, and
- discuss practical strategies for reducing population intakes

This information is to guide country specific national health programs in the Western Pacific Region, and in particular the Philippines.

The symposium was supported by:

- Asian Pacific Society of Atherosclerosis and Vascular Diseases
- Philippine Society of Hypertension
- Philippine Lipid and Atherosclerosis Society.

Welcome and introductions

Dr Rody Sy, the past president of the Asian Pacific Society of Atherosclerosis and Vascular Diseases welcomed everyone to the meeting. He noted that there was representation from a broad range of organizations including government health departments and food institutes, non governmental health organizations, food companies and the Western Pacific Regional Office of the World Health Organisation.

The following speakers presented:

Title	Presenter
Why reduce salt consumption?	Bruce Neal MD, MB ChB, PhD, FRCP, FAHA Chair, Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health
Successful salt reduction programs	Jacqui Webster Senior Project Manager Australian Division of World Action on Salt and Health
Salt consumption in the Philippines	Mario Capanzana, Ph.D. Director Food and Nutrition Research Institute Department of Science and Technology
Government efforts to reduce salt consumption in the Philippines	Frances Prescilla Cuevas Chief Health Program Officer National Center for Disease Prevention and Control Department of Health
The possible role of legislators on salt consumption issues	Martin Bautista, M.D. Gastroenterologist

Why reduce salt consumption?

Bruce Neal

Professor Neal said that very few people now questioned the fact that salt was bad for health and confirmed that the main aim of the meeting was therefore to identify practical strategies including concrete actions that could be taken to improve the problem.

Professor Neal outlined the historical uses of salt but said that it was no longer a necessary preservative for many foods. People are consuming 8-10 times more than they need to for good health. He demonstrated how reducing population salt intakes would have as great an impact as existing clinical strategies for preventing hypertension through drug based therapies, at around one tenth of the cost. He concluded that national salt reduction programs were likely to be as effective as interventions to stop smoking. He advocated for a multifaceted public health program that targeted sodium reduction as well as obesity, physical activity and consumption of fruit and vegetables.

In response to questions, Professor Neal made the following points:

- Whilst some people are more sensitive to salt, everyone's blood pressure increases as a result of eating too much salt, so everyone stands to gain from salt reduction strategies.
- There is potential for confusion in relation to salt iodisation. It is important that people are obtaining appropriate levels of iodine, and iodised salt is currently the only medium for this in many countries. However, we need to make sure that the importance of reducing salt intakes is clearly communicated so that people don't inadvertently increase salt intakes. In the longer term, alternative vehicles for ensuring that people obtain adequate levels of iodine should be identified. One method is by adding iodine to other food sources.
- Salt balance is unlikely to be more of an issue than overall salt intakes as the population is consuming in excess of what is required to be healthy.
- Whilst consumer education is an important part of salt reduction strategies, it is not sufficient. The mainstay of any salt reduction strategy should be reducing salt in foods.

Key messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Iodised salt is currently the only medium for meeting iodine requirements. Alternative vehicles for iodine consumption should be identified• Government action and changes in the food supply are essential to the solution of excess sodium consumption

Successful Salt Reduction Programs and the current situation in the Western Pacific Region

Jacqui Webster

Jacqui Webster then gave an international overview of salt reduction strategies and highlighted the present situation with regard to salt issues in the Western Pacific Region. She noted that much of her presentation was based on work commissioned by the World Health Organisation Western Pacific Regional Office (WHO WPRO) and would be used to inform a WHO technical meeting on salt reduction in Singapore in June.

Ms Webster was previously responsible for implementing the UK Food Standards Agency salt reduction strategy. She highlighted that in the UK and Finland, comprehensive multi-faceted strategies have had a positive impact on population salt intakes. She said Europe is the region with the most salt reduction initiatives coordinated by the European Commission's National Framework on Salt Initiatives.

Ms Webster then noted that the WHO Pan American Health Organisation and Health Canada have also convened meetings and agreed a joint statement to promote the development of national salt reduction strategies in the region. She provided a brief overview of salt reduction initiatives in this region as well as in Africa and Asia. She demonstrated some of the key characteristics of different strategies including governance, baseline assessment and monitoring, and the different actions undertaken. The actions outlined include: working with the food industry to reduce salt in processed foods, raising consumer awareness and labeling.

Ms Webster then gave an overview of the available information on salt intakes and sources of salt in the diet in the Western Pacific Region and highlighted the differences between sub-regions. She said that despite high salt intakes there was relatively little action to reduce salt intakes in the area. She suggested that regional coordination would be useful.

She went onto say how all countries should develop national salt reduction strategies. She outlined some of the lessons that needed to be applied in the development of these strategies. Stand alone strategies were more likely to have an impact than integrating salt reduction strategies into wider food and health strategies. Whilst NGOs had an important role to play, government leadership was required to harness the full potential.

The following points were also made during the discussion:

- A starting point for the development of any salt reduction strategy should be understanding socio-cultural factors and the roles of different stakeholders
- A public health program should consider income as hypertension is higher in areas with a lower average income.

Key messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stand alone strategies to date have been more effective than integrating salt reduction strategies into wider food and health strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Legislative approaches are not necessarily required provided there is effective engagement of industry and independent monitoring
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is more effective to try and reduce salt across a broad range of categories rather than just focusing on a few products (e.g. bread)
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Two of the main barriers to reducing salt intakes in the Philippines are:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ the predominance of small unregulated food businesses○ reaching the large rural population through communication strategies

Salt consumption in the Philippines

Mario Capanzana

Dr Mario Capanzana provided an insightful presentation into salt intakes and the contribution of different foods to salt consumption in the Philippines. He outlined the multi-staged stratified sampling design of the Filipino dietary survey.

He then described current government dietary guidelines that include a recommendation to “use iodised salt but avoid excessive intake of salty foods.” He said that moderating sodium to less than 5g should be encouraged.

Dr Capanzana showed the salt content of a range of commonly eaten foods and then used a pie chart to indicate the contribution of different foods to salt in the diet. He reported that 4g of discretionary salt is added per day to food by people in the Philippines. He showed there had been a reduction in discretionary salt use since 2003 but a parallel increase in the consumption of processed meats and canned foods which are high in salt. He also highlighted regional variations in salt intakes and hypertension. He concluded that, with the government guidance, the following advice should be given to Filipinos:

- Go natural, go fresh...
- Avoid seasoning & condiments
- Remove salt, *patis*, *bagoong*, catsup, and soy sauce off the table
- Use salt in moderation
- Plan meals low in salt or sodium content
- Cut down snack foods and instant noodles
- Rinse-off canned / frozen foods before eating
- Read labels

Key messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Current government dietary guidelines include a recommendation to “use iodised salt but avoid excessive intake of salty foods.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There has been a reduction in discretionary salt use but a parallel increase in the consumption of processed meats and canned foods which are high in salt.

Government efforts to reduce salt consumption in the Philippines

Frances Prescilla Cuevas

Ms Frances Prescilla Cuevas outlined the Government's existing efforts to reduce salt consumption in the Philippines. She said the government was promoting the use of iodized salt at the same time as sending the message to reduce sodium intakes. She provided an overview of the multi-media campaign that promoted these messages.

She noted that in July 2009 the World Health Organization, through the Department of Health, commissioned the Nutritionist-Dietitian's Association of the Philippines to establish the Guidelines on Healthy Eating. The main objectives were to:

- Develop a draft of standards and guidelines on healthy eating for a certification program for food manufacturers and food service establishments.
- Develop a symbol or logo for healthy food products and eating. The Good For You stamp would not be mandatory but would be promoted as a good way of indicating to consumers what the healthy choices are.

She highlighted the new administrative order on labeling would make labeling of sodium compulsory.

She also noted that the new Philippines dietary survey was due out in July which would make it possible to do modeling of salt intakes. She acknowledged the need for new food composition data and the lack of adequate monitoring systems for salt consumption in place.

Key Messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Guidelines on Healthy Eating include development of the "Good For You" stamp will be promoted as a good way of indicating to consumers what healthy food choices are.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• New administrative order on labeling will make labeling of sodium compulsory.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Philippines dietary survey (due out July) would make it possible to do modeling of salt intakes.

The possible role of legislators on salt consumption issues

Martin Bautista

Martin Bautista is a Gastroenterologist who is standing for the Senate in the May elections. He gave a rousing speech about the importance of electing a Doctor into government. He highlighted how much money is currently wasted through corruption that could be diverted into health.

Martin quoted *“60% of Filipino people die without ever seeing a health care professional.”*

Through the discussion that followed the following issues were raised:

- The importance of engaging with state government departments to ensure they communicate the importance of reducing salt intake to local people.
- The importance of the new dietary survey data in making it possible to do exposure studies on the contribution of different foods to salt consumption. This in turn, could be very powerful in persuading policy makers to make salt reduction a higher priority.
- The problem of government endorsement of instant noodles in schools and the need to ensure that sodium levels were appropriate for school children.
- The need for cultural change as Filipino’s love food.
- The need to educate General Practitioners on salt and health
- The problem of salt being added before even tasting the food.

Key Messages
• Engagement of state government departments is crucial
• Need to ensure food in schools has appropriate levels of sodium
• The need for cultural change
• 60% of Filipino people die without ever seeing a health care professional

Workshop

Identifying the key issues for a country

Following a low salt lunch which provided a useful opportunity for networking, the meeting participants were split into four groups. The groups were asked to consider the actions that government and industry should be taking.

Government actions
Use the results of the dietary survey to develop a communications strategy and engage with the food industry to reduce salt in foods
Meet with all sectors of food industry including retailers, manufacturers, food service
Ensure the Good For You label is promoted adequately so that it benefits those that don't read labels
Find additional ways of simplifying labels for the average consumer
Fast track data analysis to ensure reliable baseline data in relation to sodium issues
Ensure adequate resource is provided for salt reduction programs
Put pressure on local food companies to ensure that they are acting in accordance with global mandates on salt reduction or consider mandatory salt reduction
Set up effective processes for monitoring
Engage with salt manufacturers to consider how to offset any potential impacts of salt reduction programs
Obtain subsidized TV times so that public health messages around salt can be promoted and ensure existing advertising is promoting the right health messages
Consider the use of text messages to remind people about how much salt they should be eating
Identify a salt champion (athlete or actor)
Consider the potential use of tax incentives to support salt reduction
Commission stakeholder mapping/analysis to understand different roles
Ensure effective treatment programs are in place for people who have high blood pressure

Key messages
Professor Bruce Neal highlighted: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Whilst the government is already taking a role there is clearly more that could be done.• Existing programs on labeling were an important first step but it is important to start persuading food companies to make reductions in the salt levels in foods.• Advocacy organizations might start to play a stronger role in this respect through:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ engaging the food industry to take action directly○ putting pressure on government to push for stronger leadership on this issue.

Industry actions

Target products like instant noodles and condiments

Form a coalition or trade organization to represent their interests

Ensure food composition tables are up to date and contain all nutrients

Engage with the Filipino Chamber of food manufacturers

Involve organizations that can help with technical issues

Identify areas where reductions are most feasible and cost effective

Consider how to overcome problem of lack of mandatory registration of street foods

Identify how best to understand consumer preferences in relation to salt content of foods

Raise consumer awareness to drive demand as part of corporate social responsibility agendas

Establish cross-sector coalitions on key food product category and agree step wise reductions

Avoid good food-bad food dichotomy in the development of front of pack labeling schemes

Key messages

Professor Bruce Neal highlighted the key messages:

- Importance of getting a good understanding of where different stakeholders are coming from and creating a level playing field for industry.
- That the food industry is cooperative and appreciates the good they could do through salt reduction.
- A positive step would be to organize for noodle manufacturers to come together to start discussions about how to reduce salt uniformly.

Developing national program

Bruce Neal

Professor Bruce Neal summed up the day by suggesting that the following steps should be taken in the Philippines to further this issue:

- Identify a leader (most likely from outside of government)
- Establish a stakeholder group
- Develop a national salt reduction plan with realistic timescales
- Do further analysis of sodium intake and food sources of salt
- Obtain commitments from government and the food industry

He also said the George Institute would be happy to offer advice and support on:

- Establishing databases on the composition of processed and fast foods which could be used both for monitoring change and as a basis for negotiation with the food industry
- Stakeholder mapping and analysis
- Developing international collaborations with a view to identifying funding opportunities

Conclusion

Dr Rody Sy thanked the speakers and participants for their energy and enthusiasm in contributing to the discussions. He highlighted the range of ideas that had emerged and said that, whilst many lessons could be learnt from other countries it was important that a salt reduction plan for the Philippines build on the unique culture and diversity of the Philippines taking into account the needs of all stakeholders.

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