

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2008

We need to know what we ingest

GUEST COLUMNISTS

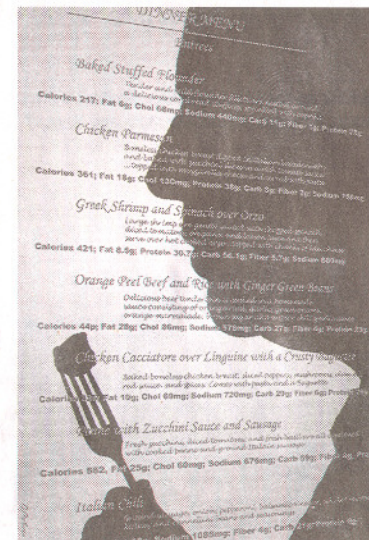
KELLY D. BROWNELL
ROBERTA R. FRIEDMAN

Should chain restaurants give you nutrition information?

The King County Board of Health, which passed regulation requiring the posting of calories on the menus and menu boards of chains, thinks they should. Two of every three King County residents want the information, and nutrition experts agree this knowledge is important. The restaurant industry talks like it supports the idea, but does it really? If it is true to form, the industry will sue the county right before the regulation takes effect, just as it has in New York City.

If the King County regulation takes effect on Aug. 1, customers will see the nutrition information on menu boards or menus at the point of ordering, so they can make informed decisions about their meals before they buy them. An industry-supported Senate bill would stop King County's efforts by allowing chains to put the information in places other than at the point of purchase. Very few people consult the poster on a wall before they order a fast-food meal.

Why should people have nutrition information at the point of ordering? Making buying decisions is hard without information about the product. That is why clothing has labels about the fabric, cleaning products have labels of their chemicals, and of course, packaged foods have nutrition labels. The spirit of such re-



quirements is to give consumers information they can use or not, but at least they have the choice. The spirit of the King County regulation is to give consumers necessary nutrition information where it matters – when they are buying.

This is not a trivial issue. Americans spend 48 percent of every food dollar eating outside the home, compared with 26 percent in 1970. About one-third of our calories come from restaurants and other food service vendors. Drive-through windows and 24-hour chains make it ever easier to eat. Restaurant food features prominently in the nation's nutrition landscape.

Why would industry resist telling consumers what goes in their bodies? Sticker shock probably. One large

McDonald's chocolate shake has more calories (1,160) than a meal of a burger, large fries and a large Coke (1,130). A Triple Whopper with Cheese at Burger King weighs in at 1,040 calories, and if you make a meal of that with medium fries and a soft drink, the number goes to 1,670. Recommended calorie intake for a typical adult in a day is 2,000 calories. It is likely the restaurants will be shamed into selling smaller portions, so down go the profits (it doesn't cost much for the companies to load in extra food and offer massive portions).

But in addition, a more health-conscious public may get pretty mad at the industry for its marketing and sales practices that undermine efforts people make to eat better, especially when parents are feeding their children.

The industry claims labeling at the point of ordering would be a burden, especially on the budgets of mom-and-pop restaurants.

But only chains with 10 or more outlets and annual sales of at least \$1 million are subject to menu-labeling enforcement. Most chains this large already have the information.

We expect companies to disclose information on a great many consumer products – we have the right to know what we are buying. It is hard to argue that something as important as what we eat should be exempt.

Kelly D. Brownell, Ph.D., is the director, and Roberta R. Friedman, Sc.M., is the director of public policy at Yale University's Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. yaleruddcenter.org