Dear Sir/Madam

Mandating calorie labelling in the out-of-home sector

The BMA is a voluntary professional association and independent trade union, representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care.

The BMA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Health and Social Care’s consultation on the introduction of calorie labelling. This submission outlines our reasons for supporting this proposed legislation to make calorie labelling compulsory in the out-of-home sector. The following is a high-level response from the BMA. A more detailed response will be submitted by the Obesity Health Alliance, of which we are a member.

Doctors have significant concerns about the impact of poor diet on the nation’s health, which is associated with a range of adverse health outcomes including increased risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, type II diabetes and poor dental health. This carries a significant cost for the NHS. The BMA has long campaigned for a range of measures to reduce the levels of obesity and overweight in the UK. We recently published a range of policy recommendations which cover the breadth of action that doctors believe is required to address this key public health issue, including restricting the marketing and promotion of unhealthy food, introducing regulatory backing for reformulation, and providing adequate funding for public health services.

As part of this comprehensive approach to addressing diet-related ill-health, it is important that people have the right knowledge to make informed choices about their diet. This requires clear
and consistent labelling and information provision on food and drink, which is why the BMA has previously expressed strong support for mandatory traffic light labelling of salt, sugar and fat alongside calorie labelling on all pre-packaged food and drink.

We know that consuming too many calories results in an increased risk of becoming overweight or obese, and that calories consumed outside of the home represent an important part of this over-consumption.¹ More than one in four adults and one in five children eat food from out-of-home food outlets at least once a week, and research shows that the foods consumed when eating out tend to be higher in calories than food consumed in the home.² Research also suggests that, when provided with nutritional information in the out-of-home sector, consumers reduce their calorie intake.³ It is therefore important that displaying calorie information at the point of sale becomes a mandatory requirement. This information must be clearly displayed and easy to read, available by portion size, and applied to all food, alcoholic drinks and non-alcoholic drinks. More comprehensive nutritional information, such as sugar and fat content, should also be made available either online or in-store, following the traffic-light format.

We are currently facing an unprecedented epidemic of obesity and its complications, at significant cost to the NHS. The BMA recognises that calculating and displaying this nutritional information may represent more of a burden for smaller businesses, and it may therefore be necessary for the timeframes for implementation to be proportionate and flexible depending on the size of the business. However, this cannot be at the expense of the strong and urgent action required to address obesity. The health of the nation must be prioritised.

Yours sincerely,

Lena Levy

Head of Public Health and Healthcare Delivery

