

PRESS RELEASE

HUNDREDS OF CARIBBEAN HEALTH PROFESSIONALS, REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS SUPPORT FRONT OF PACKAGE WARNING LABELS FOR PACKAGED FOODS

Significant numbers of regional organisations, academics, researchers, and health practitioners have voiced support for CARICOM's adoption of a front of package warning label standard ahead of the May 31st voting deadline.

BRIDGETOWN, BARBADOS, 21 MAY, 2021 - Some 300 Caribbean health professionals and over 40 regional organisations have publicly voiced support for octagonal front of package warning labels to help consumers across the region protect their health. The health professionals and organisations are signatories to a month-long campaign, spearheaded by the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC), to demonstrate national and regional support for octagonal front of package warning labels. This campaign comes as key stakeholders in CARICOM countries vote on whether Caribbean consumers will benefit from the introduction of octagonal shaped nutrition warning labels on the front of packaged foods.

Voting is currently underway across CARICOM on the adoption of the [Final Draft CARICOM Regional Standard \(FDCRS\)](#) which contains specifications for octagonal front of package warning labels (FOPWL) to be placed on food products "High in" sugars, sodium and fats, according to thresholds outlined by the PAHO Nutrient Profile Model. These nutrients are of great public health concern as excess consumption is linked to obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs); which are a significant burden to the people and economy of the Caribbean. Voting on the standard ends on May 31, 2021.

The HCC campaign, supported by partners such as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) has seen 300 individuals and 43 groups from across academia, the health sector and research putting their signatures to a statement of support for FOPWL.

"The drum beat of support for the rights of Caribbean consumers to know what is in their food is growing. Never before have we seen anything like this," commented President of the HCC, Sir Trevor Hassell. *"Caribbean citizenry represented by over 40 regional and national organisations such as the Rotary District 7030, the Caribbean Policy Development Centre (CPDC), Caribbean Association of Nutritionists and Dieticians (CANDi), Caribbean Association of Pharmacists, Faculty of Medical Sciences-UWI St. Augustine Campus, UWI Faculty of Law, Cave Hill Campus, The Caribbean Centre for Health Systems Research and Development – and over 300 public health practitioners have all united in just a few weeks in support of CARICOM moving ahead swiftly towards the introduction of octagonal front of package warning labels as a key evidence-based measure to tackle obesity and NCDs in the Caribbean."*

NCDs such as diabetes, cancer and hypertension, are the leading causes of mortality, morbidity and disability in the Caribbean region representing 78% of all deaths and 76% of premature deaths. Additionally, rates of overweight and obesity in the region are among the highest in the world and most worrying among children, where 1 out of every 3 Caribbean children is overweight or obese.

"The burden of obesity and NCDs is largely driven by our unhealthy diets which are dominated by processed and ultra-processed foods which contain high sugars, fats and sodium. People living with NCDs (PLWNCDs) and obesity are more susceptible to severe COVID-19 infection," explained Dr. Karen Sealey, Member of the HCC Board of Directors and founder and Director of the Trinidad and Tobago NCD Alliance, *"Our countries can and must do better. In building back better and fairer from the pandemic, it is imperative to invest in evidence-based policies and programmes aimed at preventing and treating obesity and NCDs such as FOPWL."*

FOPWL is one of a combination of key policies, which have been identified by PAHO/WHO as 'Best Buys' to tackle overweight, obesity and diet-related NCDs. Specifically, the octagonal FOPWL scheme allows consumers to quickly, easily and correctly identify packaged foods which are high in critical nutrients of concern. Evidence, including a study¹ conducted by the Ministry of Health and Wellness, Jamaica, the University of Technology, Jamaica and PAHO, has shown that octagonal warning labels performed better than all other front of pack labelling schemes in improving the capacity of consumers to make healthier food decisions in Jamaica.

"This study validates the CARICOM Regional Organisation for Standards & Quality [CROSQ] proposal to use the octagonal warnings on food and drink products throughout the Caribbean," said Dr. Anselm Hennis, Director of Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health at PAHO. CROSQ is the regional body overseeing the process, which has involved extensive national consultations since 2018 with relevant stakeholders including industry and commerce.

The Standard which is strongly supported by the public health community will also catalyse innovation in the regional food industry. *"What is good for health is good for business. Use of warning labels ultimately presents an opportunity for the regional food and beverage industry to reformulate and to develop and expand healthy product options to meet increasing consumer demand and contribute to healthier food environments,"* remarked Mr. David Neilands, former regional food industry executive.

With just about two weeks left until the CARICOM voting deadline, organisations and professionals across the region are sending a strong message to CARICOM that it is time to deliver on commitments made by our leaders since the 2007 Port of Spain Declaration to prioritise the prevention of NCDs through strong policies.

The HCC is proud to stand in support of this strong and effective policy to combat the alarming NCD rates in the Caribbean. Octagonal front-of-package warning labels are an important part of a comprehensive NCD strategy to protect the health and wealth of all our people – regardless of age, socioeconomic status, literacy level and native language. We urge decision makers to act now to make this a reality.

To support this campaign and see a full listing of supporting individuals and organisations, please visit the HCC website at www.healthycaribbean.org.

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CONTACTS:

Sheena Warner-Edwards: sheena.warner-edwards@healthycaribbean.org

¹ <https://iris.paho.org/handle/10665.2/53328>