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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

Eating by the Numbers

By Julie S. Downs, George Loewenstein and Jessica Wisdom

BURIED in the nearly 2,000 pages of the health reform bill passed by the House on Saturday is a provision requiring chain restaurants to post calorie counts on their menus. Given the worsening problem of obesity in the United States, and the superiority of disease prevention over treatment, calorie posting seems like a great idea. However, research by us and others suggests that it is unlikely to have much, if any, impact on eating or obesity.

There have now been three studies of New York City's menu-labeling legislation, which took effect last year and serves as a model for the national legislation. One relatively small [study](#) conducted by researchers at New York University and Yale and published in the journal Health Affairs found no impact of labels on healthier eating, although the sample wasn't large enough to detect modest changes.

We conducted a somewhat different study, supported by the United States Department of Agriculture and published in American Economic Review earlier this year, that examined purchases by 1,479 McDonald's customers in New York City in 2007 and 2008, both before and after menu labeling went into effect, and found opposite effects at two different locations.

Beyond simply measuring the impact of labeling, we gave some diners information about how many calories one is recommended to consume per day or per meal, anticipating that this information would help diners to make use of the posted calorie information. However, we found that this did not help diners use menu labels, and we saw no impact on calorie consumption.

Supporters of menu labeling, however, have been talking up a third study, conducted by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, which included more than 20,000 customers at 13 restaurant chains. It studied eating habits in 2007, before the labeling law took effect, and again this year. The full data from 2009 have not been published, but news reports indicate that the researchers found significant reductions in consumption at just four of the chains. (The only specific reduction cited was 23 calories per patron at Starbucks, a pretty modest improvement.)

Unfortunately, the press got carried away. The Reuters article on the study carried the headline, "New York Study Says Menu Labeling Affects Behavior." The National Post of Canada added a photograph with the caption reading: "A study of chain restaurants in New York City, where it is mandatory to list calorie content on the menu, found that consumers were consuming on average 106 calories less per visit." But that's not what the study found.

Instead, customers in 2009 were asked if they had noticed the calorie information, and 56 percent said yes — an encouraging sign. However, only about a quarter of that 56 percent said they used the information to decide what to order. This group, which make up only about 15 percent of total customers, bought meals with 106 fewer calories on average than those who said they didn't notice or use the information.

As anyone who has taken a course in statistics knows, correlation does not necessarily imply causation. Just because those who claimed to have used the information consumed relatively fewer calories doesn't mean that the information was what caused them to do so.

Based on the scientific literature, we know that people who seek out and use calorie information are likely to be different from other eaters in many ways, including their motivation to cut calories. Sure, it's possible that some people who looked at the information were persuaded to consume fewer calories, but it is equally plausible that those who were intending to order lower-calorie meals were more likely to seek out the calorie information.

By helping consumers make more informed decisions, calorie posting may be desirable even if it fails to reduce calorie intake. But effective policies to deal with obesity will need to involve much more than posting calories. People eat too much because calorie-dense foods are convenient and cheap, with large portion sizes priced to encourage overeating.

Members of Congress — and the New York State Assembly, which is considering similar labeling legislation — would do well to consider a wide range of methods to tip people toward healthier food choices, including efforts to make healthy foods relatively cheaper or more convenient. To pin our hopes on calorie posting is bad lawmaking based on poor reading of science.

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