



TheCoeliacSociety

25 July 2008

On behalf of The Coeliac Society of Australia Inc I wish to make a submission on Section 3.6 – Nutrition, health and related food claims.

Coeliac Disease is an autoimmune disease whereby the body cannot tolerate gluten (the protein found in wheat, rye, barley and oats). When gluten is ingested, the small bowel becomes inflamed and food is not absorbed properly.

Typical symptoms of Coeliac Disease are diarrhoea, wind, bloating although other symptoms can occur in response to lack of absorption of nutrients – anaemia, lethargy etc. Serious long term consequences of non diagnosis of coeliac disease are osteoporosis and cancer.

The only treatment for Coeliac Disease is a gluten free diet for life. Accordingly people with Coeliac Disease rely on suitable labelling of products in order to make correct food choices.

The definition of the term “gluten free” varies considerably throughout the world. Only last month Codex approved less than 20ppm as being an appropriate standard and no doubt this will be taken up by European countries. The previous Codex definition had been 200ppm. The USA is still moving towards finalisation of a gluten free standard but it appears 20ppm will be accepted.

In Canada, the definition of gluten free is “no ingredient derived from wheat, rye, barley and oats”, but contamination up to 20ppm is allowed.

This level of 20ppm has been endorsed as a safe level of gluten consumption by Dr Robert Anderson who is leading a team of researchers in developing a vaccine for Coeliac disease (copy of letter attached). The Coeliac Society of Australia also supports a level of 20ppm as gluten free and will endorse products at this level.

In Australia, the Food Standards Code defines gluten free as “no detectable gluten” and “no ingredient derived from oats or malt”. (The latter requirement is related to poor analytical methods for detecting gluten in oats or malt).

The testing methods for gluten have improved over the past ten years and the limit of detection is now 5ppm. So for a product to be labelled gluten free in Australia it must contain less than 5ppm. Accordingly products labelled gluten free in Europe may not necessarily be gluten free in Australia.

Of more concern is the fact that as analytical testing becomes more sensitive, the level of detection may decrease to 1ppm and it may be difficult, because of cross contact, for any product to be labelled gluten free. The Coeliac Society of Australia is concerned that the term gluten free may disappear altogether and we will be the only country not to be able to supply gluten free foods. This would seem to be an unfortunate outcome for a food standard developed to assist people with Coeliac Disease.

As well as the concerns of The Coeliac Society, there are costs and constraints imposed on manufacturers in complying with a standard this is more strict than is required. These would include

1. Additional costs of obtaining raw material (both in Australia and internationally) that have been processed sufficiently and segregated to the point where they can be confidently used in gluten free foods.
2. Additional costs in ensuring that manufacturing processes and equipment do not allow for cross contamination to the point of exceeding the level of detection.
3. The concern over product recall when cross contamination may exceed the level of detection but not be pick up by random testing.

Recently there was a product in Victoria taken from the supermarket shelves for routine audit testing by the Health Department of a local council. The result showed 8ppm gluten and a nationwide withdrawal was required because of the supermarket's fear of a false and misleading claim.

This is in spite of the fact that the product would be acceptable anywhere else in the world as gluten free and indeed would be endorsed by The Coeliac Society of Australia Inc as suitable for our members.

Naturally, manufacturers, particularly small ones, are most concerned that despite procedures to ensure production to a gluten free standard, contamination can lead to the situation when the product is deemed unsuitable.

If manufacturers pass these additional costs on to the selling price of gluten free foods, this will impose a further burden on coeliacs who are already paying extra costs for essential food items such as bread and cereal.

The Coeliac Society has approached FSANZ and the ACCC with the aim of altering the gluten free standard to less than 20ppm.

To date this has been unsuccessful, and this submission is made in a further attempt to have the gluten free standard changed to a level in line with international practice and one which is still suitable as a treatment for people with Coeliac Disease.

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11 October, 2007

Mr Graham Price
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Dear Graham

Re: Gluten Free Standard in Australia

I am writing in support of your application to the ACCC for a determination of a fixed level of gluten to be defined as gluten free.

I understand that, at present, the ACCC has determined that “free” must mean free and accordingly the Food Standard currently defines gluten free as no detectable gluten. I also understand that the present sensitivity of the testing procedure is 5ppm. This figure has reduced over the last ten years from 30ppm and it will undoubtedly decrease in the future as analytical methods improve.

Because of the reality of crop harvesting, manufacturing processes etc there is the very real possibility that no food will be able to comply with a detection level of, say 1ppm.

I confirm my support of the level of 20ppm gluten being defined as gluten free for two reasons.

1. It is in line with the proposed variation to the CODEX definition and will give a level of international uniformity. (USA is also moving to 20ppm).

There is no evidence that this level of gluten causes any problem for a person with coeliac disease. To the contrary, a study has shown that 10mg per day of gluten appears to be a safe daily intake (Catassi C, Fabiani E, Iacono G, D'Agate C, Francavilla R, Biagi F, Volta U, Accomando S, Picarelli A, De Vitis I, Pianelli G, Gesuita R, Carle F, Mandolesi A, Bearzi I, Fasano A. A prospective, double-blind, placebo-controlled trial to establish a safe gluten threshold for patients with celiac disease. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 2007;85:160-6.).

2. 500g of a food containing 20ppm of gluten would need to be consumed each day to reach 10mg (which is safe).

I believe it is essential that we have a definition of gluten free this is both achievable in commercial food manufacturing processes and is also safe for coeliacs. A level of 20ppm will achieve both these goals. It is also essential that the term gluten free be retained as it is used internationally in the medical profession as the treatment for coeliac disease.

I am happy to be contacted by the ACCC if any further information is required.

Yours sincerely,

Robert P Anderson MBChB BMedSc PhD FRACP

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