Does the language used in labeling of food matter?

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The Asia-Pacific region is facing an epidemic of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) partly as result of changing food habits and sedentary life styles. Studies have shown that Sri Lankan consumers are receptive to labelling and are willing to pay for these items. However, there is a wide variation in the labelling of foods. This study investigated language use in labelling of commonly used foods. A questionnaire was used to study labels of 177 common food items from supermarkets in Colombo, Sri Lanka and its suburbs with regards to labelling the name, ingredients and nutrition information. Subsequently a list of 10 common words used in the sections on ingredients and nutrition information were compiled and given to 65 patients and carers admitted to hospital with NCDs. This group was selected because the disease requires changes in dietary habits. English only was used in labelling food products by 64 (36.4%) and all three languages used by 41 (23.4%). Ingredients were mentioned in 169 and English alone was used in 99 (56%). Nutrition information was given in 163 and English alone was used by 129 (73.2%). 33.8% inpatients and accompanying carers, were not able to read even a single English word in the list. Food labels in Sri Lanka provide scant information in native languages of Sinhala and Tamil. A majority of patients accessing a premier hospital in the capital were unable to read the common contents given in labels. Urgent steps are required to make it mandatory to have information in native language.

Biography

Yashasvi Sanja Perera is a MBBS doctor passed out from the University of Colombo at the age of 28 years and currently is a post graduate trainee in critical care medicine. She has been an ASCEND (Asian Collaboration for Excellence in Non-communicable Disease (ASCEND) Research Network) trainee since 2012 and involved in predoctoral research training. She has published more than 12 papers in reputed journals and has continuing interest in non communicable diseases related research.

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