A Health Star Rating (HSR) workshop was held at the National Conference of the Australian Health Promotion Association. There were about 20 attendees representing government and academia.

The Chair of the HSR Advisory Committee, Dr Kevin Buckett, provided a short presentation and then asked the following questions:

- What is the role of HSR in supporting consumption patterns that align with the Australian Dietary Guidelines (ADG)?
- How can the HSR be improved?
- What evidence do we need to support change?
- Are there any further mechanisms we can use to achieve the same outcomes?
- What about fresh produce? Should it be kept separate? Should it be incorporated into the HSR system and, if so, how? Should a policy decision be made in relation to the treatment of fruit and vegetables – should fruit and vegetables all get X stars?
- Should caps be placed on certain categories of products? Or certain nutrients? Or nutrients within categories?

Key Discussion

Alignment with ADG

There was discussion around whether there should be further categorisation within the HSR Calculator so that a user must identify that the product being rated is either a core food or a discretionary food. Products categorised as discretionary foods could then either be capped at a certain number of stars or a penalty value (along the lines of additional baseline points) could be applied.

An attendee believed that discretionary foods should be removed from the HSR system altogether. The HSR system should be utilised for core food products only and it should be explicit that discretionary food products should not be applied a rating.

Other attendees believed that the HSR system should be applied to discretionary food products as consumers are eating these products and this issue cannot be ignored. Consumers need to be directed to the healthier version of products that they will choose to eat anyway and the HSR is especially important on these foods as it is with these processed packaged foods that consumers do not fully understand what is in them. It was noted that, whilst there were outliers in the NSW research (Technical Report: Alignment of NSW Healthy Food Provision Policy with the Health Star Rating System), these outliers were the healthiest options within these discretionary categories. An attendee raised the point of whether the focus should be on getting coverage across all products so that the HSR system is as effective as it can be, rather than changing aspects of the system that is not yet universally implemented.

It was noted that perhaps a supermarket initiative could be considered (such as the US Guiding Stars) where the system is taken off packs and placed on shelves. This would ensure the HSR system's use on all applicable products. An attendee noted that this supermarket idea could be taken further and could result in 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 star aisles.

Attendees queried whether retailers such as Coles and Woolworths could be encouraged to get on board and assist with promotion in-store. It was noted that this could include addressing products that have not been labelled with a HSR by the manufacturer.

Fruit and vegetables

There was discussion around the treatment of fruit and vegetables in the HSR system. Attendees queried whether the application of a set star rating for all fruit and vegetables would be problematic.

An attendee believed that fruit and vegetables should not be incorporated into the HSR system and that the system should be maintained as is, for processed packaged foods. It was noted that consumers know that fruit and vegetables should be consumed, however, messaging in this area has no impact. It was felt that applying the HSR to fruit and vegetables would be unlikely to change consumption patterns.

Attendees noted that any proposed changes to the HSR system would need to be carefully considered as even small changes may result in unintended consequences. Applying the HSR system to fruit and vegetables could be problematic as it changes what the system was designed to do and creates an entirely different system and playing field.

An attendee felt that retailers would likely be very supportive of signage in fruit and vegetable areas and noted that they could promote them as 'five star' sections of the supermarket.

Algorithm

Attendees considered that a cap on nutrients would be a good idea, however, discussed whether this should be determined for each category separately, considering the naturally occurring sugar in some categories.

There was some discussion about whether the treatment of sugar should be reconsidered in terms of added sugar versus naturally occurring sugar. An attendee noted that an individual in the UK has developed an analytical test to determine added sugar versus naturally occurring sugar.

Research

It was agreed that, first and foremost, evidence needs to be collected to support any proposed changes to the HSR system. Decisions cannot be made without good conclusive evidence.

It was noted that research should be undertaken on consumer's concerns with the system. Attendees noted that consumers are becoming concerned about sugar, and queried whether this needs to be addressed.

An attendee noted that the HSR system is doing quite well. It was suggested that perhaps the outliers need to be looked at (in terms of discretionary products scoring about 3.5 stars) and it

should be determined whether these are a) a real health issue or b) a public relations issue. Fish was discussed as an example. Fish is an outlier but is consumed in such small amounts and so infrequently it was queried whether it is worth considerable energy, in terms of resources, for little return. Similarly, recent research shows that the majority of sugar in the diet is coming from discretionary choices consumed during the day, not breakfast cereals. Therefore, devoting resources to the issue of sugar within the breakfast cereal category may be unlikely to result in any real health benefits.

Attendees enquired whether there is any sales data available. Sales data could be used to determine whether outliers are contributing to sales, and decisions on whether to invest resources to the issue of outliers could be made based on this data.