

**JOHN SUNDERLAND - SAINSBURY FOOD LECTURE,**  
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**THE ROLE OF FOOD IN PUBLIC HEALTH**

“Fair fa’ your honest, sonsie face, Great chieftain o the Puddin’-race”. Robert Burns wrote his famous celebration of the haggis in 1786. For most people in those days the very presence of food on their table was a cause for celebration.

In that era, the role of food in public health was virtually unknown and certainly unregulated. All that mattered was to get enough of it to avoid starvation at worst and to provide enough energy to meet the needs of daily life at best. For the great majority of people daily life meant hours of backbreaking toil in the open air. We live in a very different world today.

At the same time as Burns was writing his Address to a Haggis, Jacob Scheppe was three years into the development of his fledgling soft drinks business although it was some decades later that the Cadbury brothers started to produce cocoa and other beverages in Bull Street, Birmingham. Since then, Cadbury Schweppes has become one of the leading food and drink manufacturers in the world with sales of £6bn a market capitalisation of almost £10bn and over 50,000 employees around the world. We manufacture our products in 37 countries and market them in virtually every nation in the world.

In that sense we are an archetype for the progress of the food industry over the last two centuries. It’s easy to forget that only eight generations ago most of our ancestors lived in a world where agricultural supply struggled to meet the increased demand for food caused by population growth.

It was when we learnt how to produce more food – and distribute it more quickly that Britain was transformed for ever. An explosive increase in agricultural output based on technological advances enabled this country to surge ahead economically and become the leading industrial society of the nineteenth century.

These same events were accompanied by increasing specialisation in food production and processing. We no longer ate what we grew. Instead, we increasingly consumed the output of our incipient food manufacturing industry. By the middle of the nineteenth century the majority of individual households had become dependent on grocers and general stores who were by far the biggest category of retail outlets.

However manufactured food products were often adulterated by merchants in their shops or market stalls. It wasn't unusual at that time for chalk to be added to bread, sycamore leaves to tea, milk to be watered down and even for sawdust to be added to cocoa.

In today's world where food safety is non-negotiable it's sobering to read about an incident in Bradford in the 1850s when 200 people were poisoned - (17 fatally) by arsenic contained in mint lozenges bought from a market stall. The Government's response to incidents like that was the Adulteration of Foods Act 1860, and later the 1875 Sale of Foods and Drugs Act which remained the principal food statute for over fifty years!

The response of the manufacturers was to move away from bulk distribution towards packaged goods. Packaging – often condemned today by pressure groups – was another revolutionary improvement in consumers' lives. Proper packaging meant that goods were harder to tamper with, and even more important it allowed the manufacturer's name to be displayed.

By 1866 Cadbury's were advertising their cocoa as unadulterated. It explains why some of our early advertising material, which you can still find on eBay today, described our cocoa as "absolutely pure". That early branding gave consumers unprecedented confidence that they were getting a wholesome product, 100% cocoa, safe and at a fair price.

From that, and many similar relationships, grew the trust in food brands that we all enjoy today.

Subsequent Acts focused on labelling, product claims and advertising descriptions. Of course our entry into the Common Market in 1973 has brought a deluge of directives and regulations particularly around compositional standards – not an easy job with so many member states! I have always seen the fact that it took 27 years to agree a definition of chocolate as a microcosm for the difficulties in uniting Europe!

However, food safety remained an issue: for example, lysteria hysteria, salmonella in eggs and sporadic cases of food poisoning. None of this, note, arose from the manufactured food sector. It was eventually concerns around the management of food safety in the BSE debacle in the 1990s which gave rise to the Food Standards Agency. It is to the great credit of the FSA that over the last four years they have calmed the public's concern for food safety with a series of scientifically based and transparent judgements which the public have come to trust.

So far, I have focused on the establishment of a sufficient supply, and the safety of our food, in relation to public health.

Let me now turn to nutrition.

Here in the comfort of the Western world it's pretty easy to forget how nutritional deficiencies caused by lack of vitamins and minerals in the diet can affect health.

Scurvy, a deficiency of vitamin C is caused by a poor diet lacking in fruit and vegetables, leading to gum inflammation and tooth loss. Scurvy was particularly prevalent in sailors until 1867 when a Scottish "lime and lemon juice merchant" named Lauchlan Rose developed a process which preserved fruit juice without alcohol. This led to the passing of the Merchant Shipping Act that same year requiring all vessels to carry a daily ration of lime juice. That's why British sailors were called "limeys" and the Shipping Act did wonders for sales of Rose's Lime Juice which is still a Cadbury Schweppes brand today.

There were other such illnesses, pellagra, goitre and rickets, familiar in the twentieth century but no longer seen by doctors in the developed world today.

For us in this room all these diet deficiency illnesses are history. Our problems today are more related to over-nutrition rather than under-nourishment. However, we should always remember that 'over-nutrition' does not apply in the developing world. Although the percentage is falling one in five people in the developing world are still undernourished.

Now, let's take a minute to think about Britain today. Each week we buy and consume billions of manufactured food items. These have remarkably and consistently high levels of safety. They have become increasingly affordable, and the proportion of disposable income spent on food

declines year after year. They are always available and increased co-operation between manufacturers and retailers has ensured fresher and fresher products. Plus, all the consumer products have 'sell-by' information right on the package.

Globalisation and cheaper transport have brought seasonal produce to our supermarket shelves all the year round. Despite all the concern expressed about food miles that is the energy cost of transporting these goods, they have brought choice to British consumers and new sources of income to the developing countries that supply them.

At the same time, the industry recognized that its customers' lives were changing. More and more people were working many of them long or difficult hours. More and more were living in single-person households. The dream world of the 1950s, when Mother could spend all day shopping for food, preparing ingredients, cooking, clearing and cleaning had largely disappeared.

People wanted convenience foods, healthy, quick and easy to prepare. They wanted to be masters of their mealtimes, not slaves.

Convenience has moved in meaning, from custard powder at the beginning of the last century to whole meals you can buy from your local supermarket transport home heat in a microwave and have ready to serve in less than ten minutes. Less time than it would have taken our own parents to prepare just the ingredients alone. And convenience doesn't have to mean sacrificing quality or nutrition. On the contrary frozen peas contain more vitamin C than peas sold as fresh.

It has been argued that these trends disconnect people from the food they eat. Children don't know that milk comes from cows or that fish do not have fingers. That may be. But it is an irreversible trend. Convenience products are to the modern diet what the calculator is to mathematics.

However, that doesn't mean that children should not be taught where their food comes from. Education should equip our children for life, as well as work.

So far, I have talked only about the food we consume at home. The other great change, as Sir Francis Mackay described last year has been the revolution that brought immense variety to eating out-of-home which today accounts for a full third of all meals consumed. As a salesman on the road at the beginning of the 1970's, I can remember what out-of-

home choice meant. Fish and chip shops or cafés - mainly the transport variety. Pubs served beer. Sophistication then was a 'Berni Inn' where you got the proverbial prawn cocktail and sirloin steak followed by black forest gâteau - unless you were really daring and had the duck for a change.

We now have the most enormous variety and choice of eating alternatives from the Little Chef to the Gavroche. Especially noticeable is the rise of ethnic cuisines. Indian foods are now a bigger British industry than steel and shipbuilding combined – two traditional cornerstones of the British economy.

But, until recently the mass market end of the restaurant trade has tended to focus on products which offer the highest value for money to the consumer and tend therefore to be the most energy dense. We're talking about: burgers, French fries, pizzas, tacos and the deep-fried chicken. And please note: this is an industry, unlike manufactured products, where most consumers are not informed of the calorific content or composition of the products they are consuming.

All these developments reflect consumer choice. And all business responds to consumer choice; we have no alternative. If you doubt the consumer is king – or queen - then imagine twenty years ago trying to persuade the Board of your Beverage Company that one day consumers would pay substantial amounts of money for an alternative to what comes out of the tap for virtually free. Or that what used to be given away in restaurants in America for free after you'd had the first cup, i.e. coffee would now be sold there for \$2, here £2, for each cup. The consumer decides.

Looking back over history, I believe that the food industry in our country has made an heroic journey. Today, we are the largest manufacturing sector in the United Kingdom buying two-thirds of all UK agricultural produce. We have an admirable record for providing continuous, safe, and affordable food to an appreciative British public.

And yet once more the role of food and public health is front page. The industry is under examination more than ever before. The Government has produced a White Paper on Public Health in which food plays a prominent part. There are several aspects to this. But, they primarily revolve around the issues of salt, fat and sugar in our diet and the processed foods we eat.

Salt is a rather specific subject on which I will touch briefly, but I'd like to focus particularly on sugar and fats and their concomitant contribution to obesity with its acknowledged health implications.

What has changed to cause these concerns?

Obviously, the answer is that the world in which we live has changed. It is far too simplistic to say that we have moved from an era where too few calories were consumed to one where there are now too many.

Since this subject reached high levels of public concern and awareness just over two years ago my Company, like all others in the food industry, has tried to understand both the issue and the implications for our industry. We have spoken to nutritionists, to medical practitioners, to consultants specialising in and treating obesity, to quangos and NGOs - from the measured to the hysterical - to the media and to many, many consumers.

Let me just stress that last group: Consumers. Those for whom we have the greatest concern, as of course does Government. Our entire business credo is based upon, and I quote the Cadbury Schweppes core purpose statement, "working together to create brands people love". To do that we've got to understand consumers - their desires, their needs, their concerns. We know that our customers want food and drink which is safe and nutritious for them and their families. If we fail to meet their wants our business will founder. We spend millions of pounds a year both understanding and connecting with consumers. The knowledge we acquire is a trust. We have always used it wisely and always will.

So what does our understanding of this issue tell us? Well firstly it's complex. At its simplest level, obesity is clearly a function of an imbalance between energy consumed and energy expended. It is essential to keep both sides of that equation clearly in view.

Let's look first at the energy out side. We live in a more sedentary world. You only have to look at our roads to understand that, or the number of cars per family now compared to even twenty years ago. It's particularly critical for children. W G Grace - the great cricketer - regularly walked seven miles to school each day. That early training helped him to play first-class cricket until he was 58. As recently as when I grew up, young Mr Grace's journey, if not the distance, was commonplace. Not today.

Concerns about safety mean that we don't allow children to walk to school, at least not on their own, or to play in the streets the way they used to. Partly in consequence, their own interests have changed. Seventy per cent of children have a television – in their bedroom. When their multi-channel television palls, they can turn to computer and video games. Their minds may be turned on but not their bodies.

This reduction in activity is compounded by the reduction in school sports activities – and playing fields – in very marked contrast to our own youth when we ate the same – or more - but burned those calories off in the streets, on our cycles, and on the playing fields.

On the input side, I've already described the wider availability of food.

But consider. We may not all have the same budgets or understanding of food, but we are all exposed to the same opportunities. We all see the same advertising. We all shop in the supermarkets.

Why is it that some people have a greater propensity to be overweight than others? This is where the complexity comes in – and understanding is thin on the ground. There are clearly genetic factors at play, but even more we fail to appreciate the significance of the emotional and psychological aspects of overeating. Talk to the people dealing at first hand with obese patients, and you hear one picture. Read the papers, listen to the NGOs or even parts of Government and you hear something quite different.

The basic proposition from these quarters is that the food manufacturers suborn the free will of the British consumer. The 'line' is that through our advertising and promotion we persuade them to eat excess quantities of food which are largely responsible for the obesity problem.

Talk to the man in the street and they see the picture in diametrically opposed terms. A recent survey conducted by *The Grocer* magazine asked obese people what would help them to keep their weight under control.

80% said self-discipline, 64% free exercise facilities, 28% one-to-one counselling, 26% more healthy food options. They were also asked about the impact of tighter regulations: only 7% agreed. Banning high fat/sugar lines: again only 7% agreed. Restrict advertising: there, just 2% agreed. You see the picture.

People understand that they themselves and they alone have to take charge of their lifestyle – and answer to themselves for the decisions they make. So, we have a real conflict. One sector of society and government think the answer is trying to dictate to people what they should eat – versus the people, who recognize that they have to run their lives. The question is how best to help them? This is where the debate of the role of food in public health should be centred.

It is not easy to lose weight. The entire world slimming business is predicated on that one fact. It is a recidivist exercise for most people, although ultimately anyone who wants to be can be helped. So it's clear that prevention has got to become our focus of change.

It took many years to persuade the British public of the need to clean their teeth daily. Remember the Happy Smile Club?! I think the parallel with sensible lifestyle decisions is very similar. We're talking about an issue of personal accountability for which you need to understand the ultimate benefit.

And, the parallel with children is equally clear. Parents have a responsibility to guide and educate children about sensible appropriate self-preserving lifestyle decisions. We are all taught to brush our teeth. And it is worth remembering that advertising was and is a major educator and creator of the tooth-brushing habit. Brushing your teeth, eating and exercising in a balanced way, are similar beneficial social habits.

From this you will discern that I strongly believe that the only long-term route to prevention is through education: the provision of greater information reinforced by public health communication programmes which gradually seek to change behaviour.

I will consider the role of the food industry in a minute but, if we are to promote the message of the importance of a balanced lifestyle and the role of food consumption and exercise in public health, where does that responsibility lie? Public health programmes are not the responsibility of the food industry. They are why we elect governments.

For almost three years now, the Government has been telling the world, and certainly our media, that we are eating too much and occasionally that we don't exercise enough. If you accept my thesis of the need for a long-term educational programme to explain the importance of a balanced lifestyle, a nutritional diet and sufficient exercise, where is the

Government communication or advertising programme setting out to do that?

Here we are three years on. And, we have not seen one iota of communication directed at this by Government. All the effort has gone into blaming the food manufacturing industry for encouraging excess consumption. This is clearly a distorted view. It's one which the man and woman in the street recognise as nonsense.

This brings me to the recently published White Paper. I should add that the White Paper's publication followed an offer of support from the entire food chain, i.e. farmers, retailers, caterers as well as manufacturers in the form of a seven-point manifesto. That manifesto was designed to help Government address its declared concerns. This was an unprecedented degree of co-operation from the food chain. We offered:

1. to promote labelling and nutrition information and express it on the pack as a percentage of the recommended daily intake for the key items of calories, fats, sugar and salt – what are called Guideline Daily Amounts;
2. to develop a new much tighter Code of Advertising Practice;
3. to work on product formulation and innovation to gradually reduce the levels of fats, sugar and salt in processed foods;
4. to ensure portion sizes were appropriate;
5. to restrict vending in educational establishments and commit to wider choice;
6. to promote healthy workplace and lifestyle schemes for our own workforces (we employ four million people, 16% of total UK employment, and through our catering businesses daily touch the lives of another twelve million); and finally,
7. to use our packs as a medium for reinforcing any public health information campaign.

This is the most comprehensive manifesto of its kind ever developed to address this issue. If the manifesto is pursued in the spirit in which it was offered, it would have substantially advanced the government's objectives. Instead, we have the White Paper. Let me describe just a few of its key proposals.

On the key issue of labelling and nutritional information the White Paper seeks – and I quote - “to develop a basis for signposting foods’ contribution to a balanced diet on the basis of their fat, salt and sugar content. There should be a clear straightforward coding system so that people can understand which foods make a positive contribution to a

healthy diet and which are recommended to be eaten only in moderation or sparingly” – end of quote. It sounds reasonable.

But labelling is an EU “competence” (and I use that term with the heaviest of inverted commas) and, therefore, not one which can be simply imposed by the UK Government. Nor if it were somehow mandated for UK produced goods could it be applied to imported foods.

But, most critically, it implies the categorisation of foods into ‘healthy’ and ‘less healthy’ or, putting it simply: good and bad. There is no such thing as a good or a bad food only a good or bad diet.

Take chocolate: consumers understand from the earliest of ages the way in which to use chocolate as a treat, a small indulgence in their diet. They understand its role. Cadbury Dairy Milk is 100 years old this year. For 98 of those years, everybody, including the Government, has assumed that we offer pleasure, relaxation, even a little luxury in the lives and diets of the British people. Chocolate is made from cocoa, milk and sugar. Under the Government’s proposals, it would now become an ‘unhealthy’ food.

As reported, the more extreme proposals have included the idea of a signposting system which incorporates traffic lights! Ministers of this Government have actually tried to explain that red in a set of traffic lights on the front of a bar of chocolate would mean to consumers ‘eat sparingly’.

When I approach a set of traffic lights which are red, I don’t drive through them sparingly. I stop. I do that because red means danger, halt, don’t proceed.

This is demonisation of foods. And it is counterproductive and potentially dangerous. It patronises consumers and carries two alternative risks. Either consumers will follow the advice slavishly – not a small issue for people with eating disorders - and ignore important micro-nutrient contributions to their diet. Or, particularly with children and young customers the advice will make the “demon” foodstuffs more attractive by being forbidden and risky. Then, they will eat more out of defiance and bravado.

This approach to profiling of foods is scientifically unsound. And it’s a telling example of the nanny state although no nanny ever behaved so perversely. The ‘Wicked Stepmother’ state would be a better term.

Industry wants to put accurate, quantified, scientifically supportable information on pack for consumers; surely it is then Government's role to persuade consumers to read the pack and seek the information they need?

At the moment, we know that only about 15% of consumers read the back of a pack. Government should be aiming to reach the other 85% not telling people that products they have known and trusted, not only chocolate but, for example, meat, bread, and olive oil, have suddenly become bad for them. Demonising foods is not going to help this issue.

On promotion of food it calls for – and I quote - “action to restrict further the advertising and promotion to children of those foods and drinks that are high in fat, salt and sugar and advise Ofcom to consult on proposals to introduce such restrictions in TV advertising” – end of quote. Ofcom, the Government's own appointed watchdog, has already said on the basis of its own research that a ban would be – and I again quote - “ineffective and disproportionate while reducing choice and innovation for younger audiences”. I couldn't have put it better myself.

Countries, which have attempted to restrict advertising and promotion in this way, have seen no corresponding decline in obesity levels.

There are other proposals but interestingly little reference to alcohol – no such thing as a beer belly any more then!

It is sad that an industry which has done so much over so many decades to ensure the provision of safe, tasty and reliable affordable food for the tables of British homes should now be cast as the baddie in this debate. Our businesses are built on brand franchises. Those familiar brands, like Heinz or McVities embody the importance of trust. Our companies are far more trusted, as are our brands, than, say, politicians. Any message from us will be equally trusted. To be frank: we are disappointed that the government is ignoring our industry, with all its skills, experience and reputation, which we have offered freely.

Not only is our industry trusted but it has the capacity to move quickly to make decisions and implement them.

Salt is a good example of what can be achieved. I mentioned this earlier. Sodium is felt to contribute – although it has to be said only in some people – to high blood pressure. The FSA and Government called upon industry to reduce salt as 75% of consumed salt comes from prepared foods. We could for some products reduce salt to the levels suggested, i.e.

a reduction of about a third and do it overnight within food safety requirements. The result would be that our products would not sell or, if they did, that consumers would simply add salt back to their taste.

The route to progress here is the gradual reduction of salt so that consumers are weaned from it. It's the same as in the journey from full fat to skimmed milk. This of course is never sufficient for the less responsible NGOs who will go on television claiming 7,000 people a year are dying as a direct result of the industry failing to "act on salt". In a democracy we have to endure these sorts of taunts. However those sorts of groups can only be encouraged, I am pained to add, by the Food Standards Agency's irresponsible cartoons in its recent Salt Reduction campaign, where members of Sid the Slug's family are shown dying in their own slime as a consequence of consuming breakfast cereals or hot chocolate drinks.

However, it's important for the public at large to understand that progress can only be gradual if you want to effect the sort of permanent change which everyone agrees is the end goal. This has now been done with salt across a whole range of foods from breads to sauces to soups. Reductions are being made which in the long run will serve to achieve desired goals.

I said earlier that the consumer is king - and queen. As attitudes change, so does usage. And demand. Already swathes of lower fat, lower sugar, lower salt products are making their way onto the shelves of our supermarkets all in response to the consumer. We operate in an intensely competitive environment. And no manufacturer can afford not to anticipate and follow such trends.

Already, and this is an absolutely critical point, there is evidence that some of the associated trends in obesity are flattening off – and I mean literally - after rapid increases in recent years, and that men and women are exercising more. So there are signs already that the industry's initiatives and the media focus have combined to good effect. I am sure this trend will continue.

But where else is food relevant to today's public health requirements?

It's not all negative. Turning to the positive, I see a future where the role of the food industry in society will move from simply providing raw fuel to one that offers the potential for lifestyle benefit. Foods that provide specific functions over and above calories and normal nutrients are appearing in the marketplace. Examples would include bread fortified

with folic acid, energy drinks, cholesterol-reducing margarines, probiotic yoghurts.

The trend is already established and will continue. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century progresses, nutritionists will be able to say with increasing confidence which components, in which foods, have which effects, on which people under which mechanisms.

Foods of the future may contain active ingredients promising benefits that were never previously associated with these particular foods. I'm talking about things like better eyesight, sharper memory or more flexible joints.

However, all this is in the future. Even if food products are developed with specific benefits to health, they can never be a substitute for a healthy lifestyle. Science can make food better, but it will never remove the responsibility of people to choose a well-balanced diet and a good balance between activity and rest – not only for themselves but for their families and households.

That is why I conclude with an urgent and current plea.

For over two hundred years the food industry has been one of the most powerful forces for economic and social development in the industrialised world. It has immense resources and a demonstrated and transparent sense of care and responsibility for its consumers. The food industry's development of safe and affordable food significantly reduced and then eliminated the need for public health provision for diet-related illnesses and other forms of malnutrition. Today the problem has reversed.

The lack of exercise in our more sedentary society has left us at a moment in time where our bodies have not yet adjusted to the need for a correspondingly reduced calorific intake. The consumer has to learn to eat sensibly again. A sufficient balance of nutrients and good-tasting products which, combined with sufficient exercise, make for a balanced lifestyle.

The industry, with its huge powers of connectivity with consumers and billions of transactions a week, has an enormous capacity to influence and direct choice. And those services are at the disposal of Government – as we have indicated.

It is vital that we as a society do not accept the demonisation of perfectly safe and healthy foods when the real issue is imbalanced lifestyle as a consequence of the inadequate exercise of personal responsibility.