


BY FRITZ ESKER

FEATURE



menu

Obesity is an epidemic in the United States. It's a problem here in the New Orleans area as well because we love to eat...and drink...and party...and put off going to the gym. In certain parts of the country, local governments are taking action into their own hands by mandating that certain chain restaurants list the calories of their menu items. No such measure has been passed in Louisiana, but the idea is worth considering. Would it work? Would people even bother to read it?

On March 31st of this year, New York City's board of health required all of the city's chain restaurants to post calories on their menus. Restaurants with 15 or more outlets were required to adhere to the new law (the total added up to about 10% of New York's restaurants). The New York Restaurant Association sued to block the measure. Rick Sampson, president and CEO of the New York State Restaurant Association, objected to the way the health commissioner asked the calories to be listed. "We could give our customers a lot more than calorie counts if we could set up kiosks and distribute it the customers," said Sampson.

Legal issues for such measures can be debated endlessly. Just as people have asked if it's the government's job to legislate whether or not people can smoke in restaurants, many will ask if it is the government's business to legislate healthy eating. While there is much to discuss regarding the legality of such a measure, the bigger question for the population is this: Will posting calorie counts actually affect the way a person eats in a positive way?

Some will argue that it will make little to no difference. After all, the surgeon general has posted warnings on cigarettes for decades, indicating that it can cause cancer (and subsequently, death). Despite these warnings, people still smoke. They know it's bad for them, but they want to do it and do it anyway. Similarly, people who eat fried foods or double bacon cheeseburgers know that they're unhealthy, but they eat them anyway. They may not know the exact calories, but finding out the number won't dissuade from indulging in their favorite foods.

Aside from people who want to treat themselves to their favorite bad-for-you foods, there will also be some people who will just pay no attention to calorie listings. "Just like the nutrition labels on cookies or a bag of chips, some

mandates

people will pay attention, others won't," said Molly Kimball, a sports and lifestyle nutritionist at Ochsner Health System.

In addition to this, many people are unaware of how many calories they're supposed to be consuming in a day. Even if such a person dutifully read the calorie listings on the menus, it wouldn't help them because they wouldn't know how much was enough. "The general public is confused," said Sandy Sutton, a registered dietician with East Jefferson General Hospital, in reference to all the terminology the public must grasp (calories, trans fats, carbs, good cholesterol/bad cholesterol).

The current laws only apply to chain restaurants. Is it possible that the same regulations will be applied to higher-end establishments? Kimball said, "It's more realistic for a chain restaurant with a menu that doesn't change." A fancier restaurant with regular additions and changes to a menu would constantly have to update the menu, while a restaurant like Subway operates from a much more consistent menu.

However, while certain customers will either ignore the calorie counts or fail to grasp them, the calorie listings can be helpful to some consumers. "There's a lot of people who are really health conscious day in, day out...If someone wants to make a change, then it's just one more tool in their knowledge base," said Kimball. For a person wanting to make a change, the calorie listing can help them make more educated choices, as opposed to making a blind guess as to what food might have more calories. If someone wants to eat healthy and makes an incorrect assumption about which food has more calories, then it's just as damaging as someone ignoring it altogether.

Even if it's not a cure-all, giving customers more information is not a bad thing. "Consumers should be provided with nutritional info so they can make more informed decisions about their health and diet when they eat out," said Sutton. Sutton added that the information is particularly important because so many people eat out on a regular basis now.

This is important because many people frequently guess wrong when it comes to calorie counts. In an average man-on-the-street poll, most people would think of a salad as a healthy option. It would certainly seem like a lower-calorie option than a piece of red meat, right? This is not always the case. According to Kimball, a petite filet (steak) typically has between 250-300 calories, while a grilled chicken Caesar salad can have as many as 600+ calories.

Some naysayers might contend that it's pointless to force restaurants like McDonald's or Burger King to list calories on their menu. This is because most people with a modicum of common sense know that those foods are not healthy. Still, providing the information can be helpful. A person may not be a health nut, but they still might like to know which option at a fast food restaurant is the better one. "Even in the scheme of bad foods, it would still help people pick a better option," said Kimball.

A problem as complex as obesity will never be solved with one stroke. There is no magic bullet. Listing calories on menus will not stop obesity, especially when there are a number of other factors that make foods healthy or unhealthy (fat content, sodium content, etc.). However, education is never a bad thing and if listing calories provides even a little bit of education for consumers, then it's a step in the right direction. **HFM**