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AWARENESS OF FOOD LABELING AMONG FOREIGN MEDICAL STUDENTS

Introduction

The nutrition facts table is a nutrition-labeling tool intended to help consumers comprehend the nutritional content of food and make wise food choices [1]. Medical students are potential agents of change in food label utilization in the community [2]. Nutrition facts on food labels contain complete information about the major nutrient components (fats, proteins, cholesterol, salt, sugar and vitamins). At present, awareness about the use of food labels is important because various health related conditions occur due to consumption of unhealthy food products [3]. Most consumers are choosing unhealthy products because they are uninformed of food labels or they cannot read information on labels [4]. Food habits are usually tightly knit with the childhood of a person and are influenced by one's parents [5, 6].

Goal

To investigate the current state of consumer awareness with regards to food labeling, this study assesses how knowledge and understanding of labels affects food-purchasing decisions among the foreign medical students of Gomel State Medical University.

Material and methods of research

A sociological approach was utilized for the data collection process. Students younger than 18 years were not included in the survey. The sample size came out to be 308 students including 128 males (41,6%) and 180 females (58,4%). The data was collected with the usage of a questionnaire retrieved from, (Annamalai S., et al.) (Rai F. H., et al.) [2, 7]. All the participants who were willing to participate in the study were requested to respond to the questionnaire. They were to agree to the first question mentioning, "Do you consent to approach with giving your details for the research?" before submitting their responses, which ensured the integrity of the study.

The results of the research and discussion

The age range of the participants was 18 to 29. The majority belonged to the age bracket of 21 to 23. The mean age was calculated to be 23.5. The participants' country of origin revealed 146 Sri Lankans (47,5%) and 118 Indians (38,4%). Moreover, 23 were from Pakistan (7,4%) while 8 were from Nigeria (2,6%). The remaining 13 was mostly distributed among Bangladesh, England, China, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco and Syria (4,2%).

Regarding the year of study, majority of 126 revealed that they were in the 4th year (40,9%) while 59 were in the 3rd year (19,2%), the minority of 41 were in the 1st year (13,3%) and 49 from the 2nd year (15.9%). The fifth years were 18 (5,8%) and the sixth year had 15 (4,9%).

The respondents were also classified according to their Body Mass Index (BMI) and the majority of 189 (61,4%) belonged to the category of normal weight. An amount of 96 (31,2%) were overweight while a minority of 15 (4,9%) were underweight and 8 (2,6%) were obese. The BMI is categorized by the WHO as <18 as underweight, 18–25 as normal weight, 25–30 as overweight and >30 as obese [8]. This is an index used to find the correlation between the healthy weight required for a person with regards to their height and age.

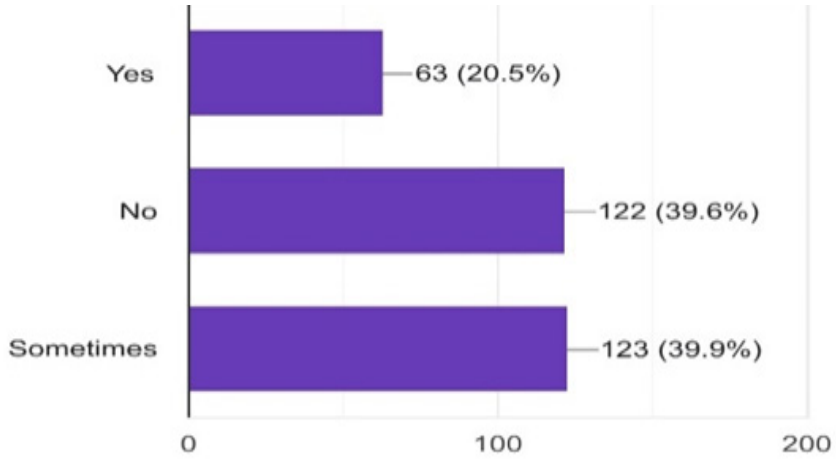

Figure 1 – Percentage of students who changed a decision after reading food labels

According to the figure above, only a very few numbers of students of 63 (20,5%) changed their decision to buy a product after reviewing nutrition facts while 122 (39.6 did not change their decision. Furthermore, 123 (39.9%) of the students changed their decision at times. It is evident that nutrition labels are utilized well only among a minority of students (Figure 1).

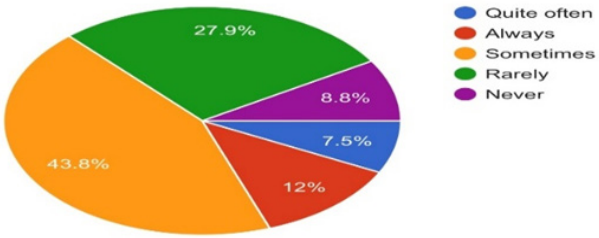

Figure 2 – Percentage of students who read food labels

It was revealed that 135 (43,8%) read nutrition labels sometimes before buying a product. Only 37 (12%) always checked the labels and 23 (7,5%) read them quite often. A massive amount of 86 (27,9%) rarely checked and 27 (8,8%) never checked them, as shown in the chart above (Figure 2). Thus, it is established again that the usage of nutritional information in daily life is not very popular among the students.

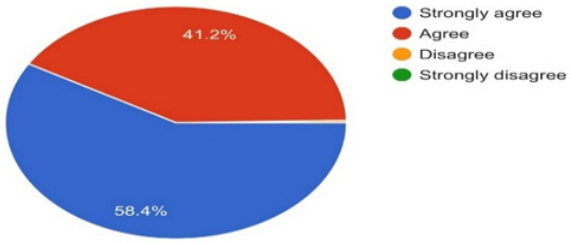

Figure 3 – Percentage of students who agree that food labels impact diseases

As shown above, none of the respondents disagreed with the fact that nutrition labels are a vital factor in preventing non-communicable diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. An amount of 180 (58,4%) respondents strongly agreed to this fact and 127 (41,2%) agreed as well (Figure 3). This institutes the fact that even though they are aware of the importance of abiding by the nutrition labels, even though the utilization of labels was found to be minimal.

Conclusion

This research highlights a significant gap in awareness and usage of food labeling among the foreign medical students at Gomel State Medical University. While many participants recognized the importance of food labels in making informed dietary choices, a considerable number lacked the necessity of using it effectively. These findings underscore the need for enhanced educational initiatives within academic institutions that focus on nutrition literacy and food labeling. Future research should explore the effectiveness of targeted educational programs and interventions aimed at increasing food label awareness among diverse student populations.

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