

from Asahi Kasei, Astellas, Dai-Nippon, Sumitomo, Eisai, Eli Lilly, GlaxoSmithKline, Janssen, Kyowa Hakko, Meiji, Nikken Kagaku, Organon, Otsuka, Pfizer and Yoshitomi. He is on the research advisory boards of Sekisui Chemicals, Pfizer, Janssen and Mochida. His research has also been funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and by the Japanese Ministry of Health Labor and Welfare.

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## A “take with a grain of salt” label for Holiday Review articles

For the past decade *CMAJ* has published a series of articles inspired by the holiday season in a section called the Holiday Review. Some of these articles consist of quirky questions addressed with real data whereas others are, in the words of *CMAJ*'s editors, “evidence-free exaggeration and premeditated preposterousness.” Although these articles are a welcome holiday diversion for many physicians, confusion has sometimes arisen because these articles are indexed in MEDLINE as if they were real research articles.

To see if these articles have been mistaken for evidence-based articles, I searched Google Scholar for citations of Holiday Review articles published in 1999–2006 and then reviewed these citations. In some instances, the authors citing Holiday Review articles clearly understood that they were citing a tongue-in-cheek “study.” However, in at least 4 instances, the citing authors appear to have mistakenly cited

evidence-free articles as if they were real studies: a citation<sup>1</sup> of a case report in which the patient was a cartoon character,<sup>2</sup> a citation<sup>3</sup> of my own completely evidence-free paper<sup>4</sup> and 2 other citations<sup>5,6</sup> of Holiday Review spoof studies.<sup>7,8</sup> If *CMAJ*'s Holiday Review articles are to continue being indexed in MEDLINE, perhaps it would be prudent to insert a note at the end of each evidence-free abstract stating that the article is for entertainment purposes only and is not a real study.

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**Competing interests:** None declared.

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## [A *CMAJ* Deputy Editor responds:]

We thank Christopher Naugler for bringing this to our attention. Normally, spoof science does not appear in PubMed searches. However, Naugler's findings show that the system we have been using is neither inclusive nor foolproof. In the future, we will include a disclaimer in the titles of our Holiday Review science articles.

**Barbara Sibbald BJ**  
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## Health Check program

One of the major tools to reduce the prevalence of hypertension and improve hypertension control is to reduce the amount of sodium added to our foods during processing. Recently we estimated that hypertension could be prevented in 1 million Canadians by reducing sodium additives to a healthy level.<sup>1</sup> However, a reduction in sodium additives will not happen overnight. A collaborative and progressive approach to reducing sodium consumption by 2020 was recently endorsed by 17 Canadian health organizations, including the Canadian Medical Association, the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada and Blood Pressure Canada.

Education of the public is critical, as is the development of foods with less sodium. The Health Check program of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada has already resulted in significant amounts of sodium being removed from many foods. As a result of Health Check's work with the Campbell Soup Company, for example, Blood Pressure Canada recently awarded the company a certificate of excellence for sodium reduction.

Health care practitioners, the food industry and health groups like the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada need to continue to work together to make a healthier diet a reality, and Health Check is an important program that is taking us toward that goal. Health advocates need to focus their energies on companies that continue to add large quantities of salt and other harmful substances to our foods rather than on organizations striving to make Canadians healthier.<sup>2</sup>

**Norm Campbell MD**  
Canadian Chair in Hypertension Prevention and Control, President, Blood Pressure Canada, Calgary, Alta.

**Competing interests:** Norm Campbell received travel assistance from McCain Foods to speak at the regional meeting of the Atlantic Dietitians of Canada in 2007. There was no contact with McCain Foods about the talk or its content.

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tion in dietary sodium additives on hypertension and its related health costs in Canada. *Can J Cardiol* 2007;23:437-43.

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I am writing in response to the *CMAJ* news item on the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada's Health Check program.<sup>1</sup> As a practising cardiologist, I know the critical role that a healthy lifestyle plays in the prevention of heart disease. An important part of such a lifestyle is a well-balanced diet that follows the recommendations in *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide*.<sup>2</sup> In a world where confusing information on nutrition is everywhere, the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada ably fills a vital role in helping people to maintain good health and reduce their risk of developing chronic diseases such as heart disease.

Through its Health Check program the foundation makes a commendable effort to identify foods that can fit into a healthy eating plan. Although we would all like to see Canadians make major changes to their diet overnight, this will not happen. The Health Check program helps people to make important changes to their diet over time and thus keeps them out of my office.

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**Competing interests:** None declared.

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As volunteer chair of the Health Check Technical Advisory Committee, I am very proud of the work done by the program to improve the Canadian food supply and guide consumers to products that can be part of a healthy overall diet — a diet that should obviously consist primarily of fresh, whole foods but that can also include other foods. Processed and convenience foods are a

fact of life in our society and are not going to go away. Ignoring this reality does not serve the health of Canadians.

Over the last 10 years, we have worked with companies to remove substantial amounts of salt and harmful fats from foods. Products submitted to Health Check are evaluated against 9 criteria: total fat, saturated fat, trans fat, protein, fibre, sugar, sodium, vitamins (vitamin A, vitamin C and folacin) and minerals (calcium and iron). Our criteria are based on *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide*.<sup>1</sup> We continually update the program's criteria to reflect changes to evidence-based nutrition recommendations.

We know that consumers are confused by the myriad of choices and messages in the grocery store, so we welcome the growing discussion on programs to provide nutrition information on the front of product packaging. That is why the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada agrees with the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health's recommendation to adopt a national front-of-pack program in Canada that is science-based and transparent and that uses objective criteria, the same principles on which Health Check is based. We believe Health Check is a good model worthy of consideration, but not the only model. The most important point is that with one national standard, consumers could compare products and make healthier choices more easily.

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**Competing interests:** None declared.

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The Heart and Stroke Foundation's Health Check program was recently discussed in *CMAJ*.<sup>1</sup> Healthy-for-you symbols on the front of food packaging have the potential to help grocery shoppers choose healthy foods and interpret

products' nutrition facts. However, programs that use weak nutrition criteria and permit stamps of approval to appear on products sold beside more nutritious products that do not carry the program's symbol may have negative net effects on public health.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada's Health Check nutrition criteria are certainly stricter than some major companies' healthy-logo standards. However, approaches developed by researchers at Yale and Oxford universities<sup>2,3</sup> and the 150-outlet US-based Hannaford Brothers grocery store chain suggest that there is room for improvement.

It is clear that many Canadian shoppers believe the Health Check logo flags foods that, in an absolute way, promote health. However, the Heart and Stroke Foundation concedes that some products that carry the logo are only relatively nutritious compared with non-nutritious products in the same product category.<sup>4</sup> However, even that may not be so. For example, of the 257 fruit and vegetable products enrolled in the program, 194 are juices, fruit leather and french fries — hardly nutritional superstars — and only 14 are fresh fruits and vegetables.

In 9 years, the Health Check program has enrolled 1500 products, which is an impressive feat for a non-governmental organization. However, the Health Check program covers less than 3% of available groceries, which is too small a percentage to ensure a significant or even a net positive effect on public health. Using stricter criteria, the Hannaford Brothers chain credits 28% of its entire inventory of 25 500 products with at least 1 of 3 "guiding stars." (The other 72% of products do not get any stars.)

The time has come for Health Canada to mandate (and for health advocates to promote) a standard healthy-for-you symbol, colour-coding or rating scheme for all eligible prepackaged and restaurant foods that is based on sound nutrition standards. As a first step, Health Canada should commission, perhaps with the US federal government, the US National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine to conduct a study to help identify the best