

## AGENCY ADVICE TO HEALTH MINISTERS ON FOLIC ACID AND THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE

### The Issue

1. The Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (COMA) concluded that fortification of flour with folic acid would contribute to a reduction of neural tube defect (NTD)-affected pregnancies.
2. The benefit of this approach is that it would increase folate levels in the target group who have unplanned pregnancies, and others, who are unlikely to take folic acid supplements. The downside is this involves fortification at levels not naturally found in food, it can mask vitamin B12 deficiency in older people and raises issues about freedom of consumer choice.

### Consultation

3. Formal public consultation took place in 2000 on COMA conclusions on fortification and the Food Standards Agency with Health Departments convened a major stakeholder meeting in March 2002 to discuss issues relating to fortification. The consultation generated a range of views on options of mandatory fortification to replace the current voluntary fortification approach:
  - 59% of respondents to formal consultation supported mandatory fortification with 30% opposed
  - consumer groups opposed mandatory fortification on consumer choice grounds and because of the implications for masking of vitamin B12 deficiency in older people

### Industry position

4. Industry confirmed that a voluntary approach would not deliver fortification in products sufficient to achieve folate increases in the target group. This was based upon the practical problems for industry in fortifying all flours and the cost of folic acid (£500k - £1M per annum) which industry would want Government to meet. Industry confirmed a mandatory approach was the only way to ensure

fortification of flour/products to achieve the increase in folate intake envisaged by COMA.

### **Vitamin B12 deficiency in older people**

5. COMA, when concluding in favour of fortification, highlighted the need for heightened clinical vigilance to detect masking of vitamin B12 deficiency resulting from fortification of flour with folic acid. The importance of this has been highlighted again by Professor Sir John Grimley Evans in recent work supporting the introduction of fortification but in conjunction with his proposal for the introduction of yearly GP checks at age 75 and opportunistic testing of 65 – 74 year olds for vitamin B12 deficiency – checks which currently are not in place.

### **Food Standards Agency Advice**

- Voluntary fortification and promotion of supplements have had limited impact to date in reducing NTD-affected pregnancies
- The Agency has always emphasised the importance of a balanced diet to obtain sufficient vitamins and minerals for a healthy lifestyle. Despite an educational campaign in relation to folic acid supplementation within the target group many women, particularly those in high-risk groups, do not achieve optimal folate intakes. Based on this evidence, there is no real alternative to fortification as a means of increasing folate intake; although work on new ways of strengthening of promotion of supplements can make an important contribution to this
- There is little prospect of increasing fortification of products through a voluntary approach
- Consumer organisations have strong objections to a mandatory approach
- There is no evidence that fortification at the level proposed is unsafe.
- There is little evidence on the impact of similar approaches to fortification overseas on the prevalence of NTDs and vitamin B12 deficiency despite discussions at length between Agency Executive and Government officials (at a senior level) in several overseas countries.
- Fortification of flour on a mandatory basis has the best chance of delivering increased folate intake but has practical and cost implications for industry as well as implications for the diagnosis and detection of vitamin B12 deficiency in older people
- A proposal that would enable fortification has been made but would need to be conditional upon the implementation of a surveillance (detection and diagnosis)

programme for older people which Health Departments will need to consider in relation to both its practicability and its affordability

- By a majority decision, the Board does not currently recommend the mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid and wishes to further review emerging evidence on the impact of fortification on vitamin B12 deficiency in older people, and its potentially beneficial effects for other groups within the general population, as this becomes available from overseas.

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Food Standards Agency

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