Reviewer’s report

Title: Protocol for a pilot randomised controlled trial of an intervention to increase the use of traffic light food labelling in UK shoppers (the FLICC trial)

Version: 1 Date: 26 November 2014

Reviewer: Gary Sacks

Reviewer’s report:

This paper describes a protocol for a pilot randomised controlled trial of an intervention designed to increase the use of traffic light labelling during supermarket food purchase decisions for pizzas and ready-meals in UK shoppers. The protocol is clearly well thought-out, well-described and the pilot trial described here will be of great value to public health in an extremely policy relevant area.

Major Compulsory Revisions

My main concern is that the design of the trial does not appear to be able to take into account factors other than the label that may influence purchasing behaviour. For example, we know that price promotions (particularly "buy one get one free") have a major influence on purchasing behaviour in these food categories, yet I could not find anywhere in this protocol that would allow the effect of price promotions to be taken into account in the analysis. Similarly, it is not clear how the trial will be able to take into account the effects of seasonality, in-store promotions (of various kinds), and the amount of shelf space allocated to particular products. We know that these are all likely to be bigger influences on what people buy than traffic light labels, and so I would have expected more details of how these aspects will be handled. While I understand that some of these factors are more difficult to factor into the analysis than others, data on price promotions should be readily available from the retailer and I would have expected it to be part of the data collection activities. Seasonality should also be able to be accounted for.

p3, line 8: An additional, and critical, objective of traffic-light labelling is to provide information to consumers about the nutritional quality of products. Firstly, this needs to be acknowledged here. Secondly, I would have thought it valuable to assess changes in awareness / understanding of product nutritional information as part of the trial, perhaps as one of the secondary outcomes. The risk is that trials such as this focus so much on changing behaviour, that we might miss other important benefits, such as improvements to understanding of nutritional information which are important from many aspects, including a consumer rights perspective. Linked to this point, it is not clear why the authors are proposing hypothesis 'c' (that the intervention will not change purchasing behaviour outside of the targeted food categories). This needs to be better justified, or else modified in light of my comments.
p5, 2nd last line: Do the authors mean it will not affect the total amount (in grams) of foods purchased? This needs to be clarified. If they do indeed mean total grams purchased, the authors need to check that all ready meals and pizzas weigh the same amount. If they don't all weigh the same, perhaps it would be better to say that "the total number of ready meals / pizzas purchased will not change".

Minor Essential Revisions
p4, line 3: "purposes"
p4, line 9 (and elsewhere in the manuscript): please provide metric measures
p4, 4th last line: Perhaps say "may be less aware" or provide a reference to substantiate this assertion

Discretionary Revisions
Page 15, 10 lines from the bottom: The authors mention very briefly that subgroup analyses by socioeconomic status will be conducted to assess potential impact of the intervention on social inequalities. These few lines are the only mention of socioeconomic status in the whole protocol and it reads almost like an afterthought, whereas, in reality, the analysis by SES group could well be the most beneficial aspect of this study. I wonder if it would be useful to integrate a discussion of SES in other parts of the manuscript (perhaps even as an additional objective and hypothesis) and provide a bit more detail of how this analysis will be performed.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I have active research collaborations with several of the authors of the paper, but no other competing interests.