

22. FOOD ADVISORY CONSUMER SERVICE (FACS)

MEETING THE PRESS 1992

Michael Young (UK), Ron Timm, Jane Badham and Owen Frisby

The **Food Advisory Consumer Service (FACS)** was launched on 16 Jan 1995 as South Africa's first independent food and nutrition consumer service. Under the guidance of Dr Pieter van Twisk, Scientific Director, it set out to disseminate accurate and factual information on food and nutrition related matters while also serving as an educational medium and information centre. This would be done by means of FACS-compiled leaflets on contentious issues and a week-day telephone service, backed up by consumer,

scientific and membership sub-committees and a FACS Council. The latter was set up with representatives from SAAFoST, The Association for Dietetics in SA (ADSA), the SA Society for Microbiology, the Dept of Health, manufacturers, retailers, ingredient suppliers and consumer and research organisations. A constitution was drawn up. Funding for FACS was to be obtained from the private sector.

FACS COMMITTEE 2008

Back: Owen Frisby, Dave Watson.

Mid: Wilna Jansen van Rijssen, Pieter van Twisk, Anne-Marie de Beer.

Front: Lillibeth Moolman, Ann Goslin, Gerda Lombard. Absent / **Insert** - Bernard Cole.

Early history

Prime motivator of the Food Advisory Consumer Service and its first chairman, was Peter Bush who, some years before, had seen the need for such a service in order to respond to the increasing incidence of sensational, ill-informed and misleading media reporting on the food industry, food processing, food safety and nutrition.

The concept was given a boost during a visit to South Africa in 1992 by Michael Young, Executive Director of the Food Safety Advisory Centre (FSAC). This centre had been started in the UK some three years previously as a result of a similar lack of balance in media reporting. A press conference, at which Mr Young and SAAFoST Council members were present, was held at the Sunnyside Park Hotel, Johannesburg to discuss and promote the need for a similar body in South Africa. Mr Young stressed the fact that, to have credibility, it was important to form an independent, science-based unit, able to respond rapidly and appropriately to any food and nutrition associated sensationalism appearing in the media.

Peter Bush effectively campaigned to bring the matter to the attention of the food industry and organised several widely representative meetings to discuss and plan for the establishment of a consumer-friendly body dedicated to providing scientifically correct and reliable information on food related issues. At an open meeting of interested parties attended by ninety individuals in 1993 a decision was taken to proceed with the idea and hold an inaugural board meeting to take the matter further. This took place in 1994 when Pieter van Twisk was appointed as the Scientific Director and tasked to establish the service. FACS was invited to become a member of the Food Legislation Advisory Group (FLAG) soon after its formation

Once launched, FACS ran smoothly, firstly under Chairmen Peter Bush and in 1996 Dr Theo van de Venter and under Scientific Directors, Pieter van Twisk and in December 2000, under Jane Badham. Primary activities included taking telephone calls and producing, mailing and faxing leaflets on a wide range of subjects to sponsors, consumers and the media. Typical leaflet titles on issues of concern at the time included the following: *Maintaining the Cold Chain, Food Labelling - a Consumer's Guide, Food Additives - a Consumer's Guide and Facts About FACS.*

FACS sponsors

Obtaining sponsorship in a competitive market was always a challenge but thanks to dedicated supporters, the Service continued uninterrupted and in good standing until it effectively became part of SAAFoST in 2003 at which point the following companies were sponsors: CSIR, Kelloggs, Nestle, Pick 'n Pay, Robertsons, SA Sugar Association (SASA), Tiger Brands and Unifoods. FACS was officially re-launched as a SAAFoST administered and funded entity on, "World Consumer Rights Day", 15 March 2004.

FACS under SAAFoST

Having been associated with SAAFoST since its very beginnings and with the association being able to provide the finance, administration, expert advisory base and even greater independence through not being directly funded by industry, the union was an easy and

natural one. SAAFoST undertook to ensure that FACS would not lose its identity nor its independent character. Dr Pieter van Twisk became Chairman of a new FACS Committee with the following serving on it: Nigel Sunley (SAAFoST President 2003 – 2005), Mesdames, Moira van der Linde and Jane Badham (ADSA representatives), Lillibeth Moolman, and Ann Goslin (SANCU representatives, Ann as secretary) and Messrs, Ron Timm (until Sept as SAAFoST President 2001 – 2003), Bernard Cole (Treasurer) and Owen Frisby (ex officio, SAAFoST Executive Director).

Hotline and website

During 2003, a “Consumer Hotline” was set up and operated on weekday mornings by SANCU, FACS became a web based service which was administered by SAAFoST and Ron Timm penned the FACS Terms of Reference. The following seven FACS leaflets were the first to be placed on the website: *Food Poisoning, Allergy, Food Fortification, Antibiotics in food, Olive Oil, Organic Foods and Fibre in Foods* while the following seven were in the process of being finalised: *Aflatoxin, Trans Fatty Acids, Frying Oil Safety, Soy, Botulism, Avian Flu and Dairy Products*. By 2010 the number of articles on the FACS website (www.foodfacts.org.za) had risen to 75.

The new FACS committee busied itself after 2003, mainly with articles for the site, responding to consumer queries and promotion of the service but also with occasional press releases and responses to proposed legislation, poor and inaccurate reporting on food and nutrition and illegal and sensational advertising.

FACS promotion

In celebration of International Consumer Rights day on 15 March 2006, 150 000, "Food and Nutrition Facts" brochures were prepared and distributed through food organisations and the 10000 or so members of the Health Professionals Council of SA (HPCSA). In 2007, a similar number were sent to branches of retailers Pick 'n Pay, Shoprite and SPAR for distribution to their customers. In 2008 a media *Snippets* document was prepared, covering the most contentious food and nutrition issues of concern to consumers and it was distributed to over 100 individual journalists, newspapers and magazines. In 2009, the aforementioned was published in a consumer booklet on obesity, published in association with SANCU and other partners and in 2010, an updated batch of 50 000 FACS promotion pamphlets was printed for general circulation, including universities, and issued to delegates at the SAAFoST hosted, International Union of Food Science and Technology (IUFoST) World Food Congress in 2010.

Food Information Organisations (FIO's)

In 2008, FACS joined the International Network of Food Information Organisations under the umbrella of the International Food Information Council (IFIC) in Washington. The FIO network included bodies such as the Asian Food Information Centre (AFIC), the Australian Food and Grocery Council (AFGC), the Canadian Council of Food and Nutrition (CCFN), the European Food Information Council (EUFIC), the Japan Food Information Center (JFIC) and the New Zealand Nutrition Foundation (NZNF). Contact was maintained with these FIO's through regular telecons and a close relationship was built up.

FACS will be administered by a committee appointed by the SAAFoST Council. The committee will consist of a Chairman, Treasurer, SAAFoST President, SAAFoST Executive Director, Two members from organised consumer bodies, and two other members. All committee members, with the exception of the consumer body members, will be professional members of SAAFoST.

The function of the committee will be to:

- * Keep a register of acknowledged experts on food issues to assist with the compilation of articles (Occasional survey of SAAFoST Professional members)
- * Commission the writing of articles on Food Issues
- * Ensure peer review and approval by FACS committee and the SAAFoST Council before publication on the website. (E Mail with 24 hour response deadline may be used in urgent situations)
(The Chairman is authorised to speak to the media on any Food or Nutrition issue on behalf of FACS.)
- * Budget for expenditure, approve expenses and account to the council for finances by means of annual audited accounts.
- * Meet at least quarterly

Articles on the website will be written primarily for consumers and the media, each article will have

- A header (FACS logo)
- Footer (FACS objective and FACS contact details – website address and hotline number)
- Year of issue or update

Articles will be reviewed by the committee on a regular basis in order to keep them current (at least every three years) and updated where necessary

Posters previously issued by FACS will be scanned onto the website but new posters will not be reprinted as a matter of course when existing stocks have been exhausted.

Finances previously accumulated by FACS will be used exclusively for FACS work according to the approved budget and, once this source of funding has been exhausted, the FACS committee will submit a budget for approval by the SAAFoST Council in February of each year for an allocation from SAAFoST Ffnds. The financial year of FACS will run from 1 July to 30 June