

Gluten standards in firing line

BY JULIA MEDEW, MARK HAWTHORNE

Australian food manufacturers and suppliers are pushing to increase the amount of gluten allowed in so-called "gluten-free" foods which thousands of people with digestive problems rely on.

The Australian Food and Grocery Council is set to ask Food Standards Australia New Zealand to relax its standard for "gluten-free" labelled foods, which states they must have undetectable amounts of gluten.

The lobby group instead wants such foods to have less than 20 milligrams of gluten a kilogram, which would bring Australia in line with British and European standards.

A confidential survey by the council of 98 businesses that either manufacture "gluten-free" foods or supply them found nearly 80 per cent think the new standard would cut down manufacturing plant costs, including gluten-testing costs, and make it easier to source products from overseas.

Coeliac disease causes the immune system to react abnormally to gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye, barley and oats, and causes inflammation in the lining of the bowel. The condition, which affects about one in 100 Australians, can cause diarrhoea, constipation, vomiting and vitamin and mineral deficiencies. It also increases the risk of certain cancers including lymphoma and bowel cancer.

Melbourne dietician Georgie Rist said people who were eating products with no detectable amounts of gluten could experience changes if they were to suddenly start consuming higher amounts. "This may create fear and confusion amongst the population and could drive individuals to consume less packaged foods and more whole foods from core food groups which are naturally free from gluten," she said.

Dr Sue Shepherd, another dietician who specialises in food intolerances, said Australia had to rethink its rule because tests were becoming so sensitive that many of

Jenny and Rachel Crandell.

Photo: Mick Tsikas



More variety of foods would make life easier, says mother

Jenny Crandell was diagnosed with coeliac disease when she was 30. Now 39, she recently learnt her oldest child, Rachel, 6, is also coeliac.

Ms Crandell says the hardest thing about catering for her family's dietary requirements is finding a variety of gluten-free foods everyone will eat. "It's so much easier if you can have one meal for the whole family - if we have spaghetti bolognese I have to cook two lots of pasta, but if I make a

lasagna everyone just has gluten-free," she says.

"That makes dinner controllable but the hard thing I find now with my daughter is breakfasts and lunches. What do you put in the lunchbox? And for breakfast, there's not as many options for a young child... it's quite an adjustment."

Ms Crandell believes changing the gluten-free standard will make life easier for her family.

the foods meeting the "undetectable gluten" standard would soon fail it.

Dr Shepherd said scientific evidence showed traces of gluten below 20 milligrams were not harmful to people with coeliac disease.

But not everyone in the industry is pushing for the change.

Michael Braeckel, the chief executive of Freedom Foods and the former boss of Kellogg's Australia, strongly opposes any changes to labelling standards for gluten-free foods.

"This is not just about consumer honesty and the future of the Australian food manufacturing industry, it is also a health issue. The changes as put by the AFGC are plainly misleading to consumers. We have great concerns and have lobbied the AFGC to tell them we strongly reject the proposal to change the current regulations and testing requirements."

A spokeswoman for FSANZ said it was working with the AFGC on its application.