



RAW MILK CHEESE PRODUCTION: LABELLING COMPLIANCE AND CONSUMER INFORMATION

Mauro Conter, Martina Rega, Giulia Sgambellone, Cristina Bacci, Silvia Bonardi

Dip. Scienze Medico-Veterinarie, Università di Parma, Italy.

Purpose. Although the “raw milk” statement requested by Regulation (EC) No 853/2004 was designed to inform consumers about the specific microbiological risks associated with cheeses made with raw milk and to support informed choice, especially for vulnerable groups, it is often perceived as a marker of naturalness, artisanal quality, and added value rather than as a health-related warning. This study assessed whether mandatory “raw milk” information and health warnings were effectively communicated at retail level, including non-prepacked cheeses sold at the delicatessen counter. Such information are also needed within the current Italian regulatory framework and in light of the recent Ministry of Health guidelines on Shiga toxin-producing *Escherichia coli* (STEC) control in non-pasteurized milk cheeses.

Methods. An observational survey was conducted on 100 raw milk cheese references collected from large-scale retail, specialty shops, markets, dairies, and agritourism outlets. For each sample, milk origin, cheese texture, point of sale, packaging type, presence of the “raw milk” statement, YOPI warnings, and additional information tools were recorded. Descriptive statistics were combined with chi-square and Fisher’s exact tests to examine associations between labelling correctness, packaging, and point of sale.

Results. Bovine milk cheeses predominated (81%), followed by sheep (10%) and goat cheeses (9%). Semi-hard cheeses were the most frequent texture (58%). Most products were

sold as non-prepacked cheeses (71%), while 26% were in their original packaging and 2% were sold over the counter. Overall, 54% of the samples displayed a correct “raw milk” declaration, whereas 46% lacked. Health warnings for vulnerable consumers were present in only 11% of the samples. Labelling correctness was strongly associated with packaging type and retail channels: All cheeses sold in their original packaging were correctly labelled, compared with only 39.4% of non-prepacked products. Large-Scale Retail Trade showed a higher proportion of compliant labels (69.2%) than other retail channels. These associations were statistically significant according to both chi-square and Fisher’s exact tests.

Conclusions. The “raw milk” claim may be perceived by consumers as a marker of authenticity and added value; however, from a public health perspective, it should always be coupled with clear and readily understandable risk communication. Our findings suggest that reliance on indirect information tools, such as ingredient books, is inadequate in routine retail practice. In line with recent Ministry of Health guidelines, mandatory warnings for vulnerable consumers should be clearly visible not only on prepackaged products but also on non-prepacked and counter-sold cheeses, ideally through standardized wording and/or simple pictograms to improve information accessibility and consumer protection. Such warnings should remain mandatory even for non-prepacked raw milk products, similar to the requirements for allergen information under Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011.