

FACE TO FACE



Ursula Arens

Ursula has a degree in dietetics and currently works as a freelance writer in Nutrition and Dietetics. She enjoys the gifts of Asperger's.

Our F2F interviews feature people who influence nutrition policies and practices in the UK.

Ursula meets:

KAWTHER HASHEM

Campaign lead, Action on Sugar

Research Fellow, Queen Mary University of London

Food policy expert



Should food campaigners be learning from other campaign groups? Shout during meetings? Petition to Parliament? Wave placards? I meet with (anti) sugar campaigner Kawther Hashem, but cannot match this charming gentle advocate with the fist-shaking demands of other campaign leaders.

Kawther graduated with a BSc in Nutrition from King's College London in 2009, and admits to being a quiet, not-so confident student. But she took part in lots of student societies, and observes in hindsight her particular early interest in the macro-issues of nutrition, such as the policy and economic drivers of food choice.

On graduation, she filled in lots of job applications, but the nutrition jobs market was sparse and dry. One agency application did lead to her first job with Unilever. "The interview was scary, with the unannounced instruction to write about sterols and stanols (added to some Unilever spreads to support cholesterol lowering). Luckily, I had done a presentation on this at university, and got the job," said Kawther. She worked on the communication of diet and heart disease risk, and really enjoyed some travel, along with the perks of employment with a large international food company.

Since it was a fixed-term contract, she was quickly job hunting again. The campaigning charity, Sustain, asked if she would like to be a volunteer nutritionist, doing projects on food advertising to children. The post

evolved to a job funded by the British Heart Foundation. Kawther took online personas as young children and described the increase in highly targeted marketing of high-fat, salt and sugar foods and drinks. While the Advertising Standards Authority had clear references for the assessment of print and broadcast media, social media platforms were new, ethereal and less regulated – and, of course, less familiar to older expert advisers on food advertising to children.

In 2012, Kawther got a fixed-term contract job as a nutritionist with a policy coordination group, Consumers International. "They are an international group of about 250 membership organisations representing the consumer perspective of food and health issues. During this time I learned a lot about the developments of legislation on nutrition claims and food labelling," said Kawther.

For her next job, she applied to a vacancy at the campaigning group Consensus Action on Salt and Health (CASH) based at Queen Mary University of London, and has since been promoted several times. "I was excited by their focus on achieving better public health through media critique and demands for product reformulation." At the start, her job was balanced with the one-day a-week enrolment to a master's degree in Food Policy at City, University of London. Her days were busy researching and communicating salt reduction, and in 2014 she led her first publication of



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a paper in the BMJ, assessing the salt content of different cheeses. Halloumi is the cheese with peak salt.

But her master's project was on sugar contents of foods and, during the same period, the campaign group decided to launch the twin arm of Action on Sugar. By 2016, there were government and food industry discussions on voluntary sugar reduction schemes, prompted by the publication of the SACN committee report on carbohydrates and then the Childhood Obesity Plan. By 2018, the stronger measure of a mandatory source levy, the Soft Drinks Industry Levy, had been applied.

Kawther shares the good news that free sugars content of soft drinks is coming down and, therefore, intake amongst children is coming down too. But the bad news is the persistent popularity and growth of so called 'energy' drinks. Although these products are a small sector of the soft drinks market, sales volumes in the UK are increasing. "They should not be marketed to under-16s, and many campaigners support the complete ban of sales to teens," said Kawther. I share my contrary thoughts. Sales bans to under-16s would be very difficult to enforce and would be the cheapest and fastest way to communicate (unjustified) potency of these products. It would strongly support the impressions that energy drinks spend so much on advertising to promote. Technically energy means calories, and we imagine a new slogan to promote potatoes: the energy vegetable.

Being immersed in the discussions of sugar contents of foods and national reduction strategies, Kawther slipped in a PhD on the subject. Many of her discussions are directly with food manufacturers. "I have so much respect

for food company nutritionists. They have a lot of detailed knowledge and skilfully balance support for improving products, with pragmatic understandings of legal and consumer issues, and they are convincing businesses to do the right thing."

The Sugar Reduction Programme is managed by Public Health England and has shown success in some areas. Kawther lists the three strategies. "First, the reformulation of sugary products. Second, the reduced portion size of sugary products. And third, shifts to choices towards lower sugar products." Yoghurts and breakfast cereals have achieved reductions, but disappointingly puddings have increased sugar contents.

Kawther now balances academic research (she has published 16 papers on salt, sugar and calorie reduction) and duties with campaigning to industry and media. There are still many confusions amongst consumers, but also amongst healthcare professionals and industry experts. Dietary targets linked to free sugars contrast with nutrition labelling declarations of total sugars, the health claims suggested by natural and exotic sugar sources (think coconut sugar) and the anxieties about sweeteners.

It is strange that in the environment where there is general uniform critique of sugary foods, there is such consistent warmth and regard for the television programme, *The Great British Bake Off*. There is no more glowing promotion in the public arena for the pleasures of cakes and biscuits, and their cultural meaning as sharing love and caring. Kawther gives me a huge smile and confesses: "I love watching *Bake Off*." And we imagine ways to tweak the show towards healthier options.