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Commentary

The healthy canteen initiative: Transforming workplace nutrition in Thailand

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Abstract

Thailand is addressing the growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) through a novel, preventative public health approach that begins in workplace canteens. Rising rates of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension–largely driven by poor dietary habits–have prompted the Ministry of Public Health to launch the "Healthy Canteen" initiative in 2020. Spearheaded by the Department of Health's Bureau of Nutrition and aligned with the World Health Organization's Global Strategy for Food Safety, the program establishes stringent nutritional and hygiene standards for workplace cafeterias nationwide. Certified canteens must meet seven criteria, including offering healthy menus, fresh fruit, reduced-sugar options, and visible nutritional labeling. Digital innovations, such as the "Food4Health" application introduced in 2022, have accelerated certification processes and improved monitoring efficiency. The number of certified healthy canteens has grown from 81 in 2021 to 373 by the end of 2024, with the initiative expanding through public-private partnerships involving hospitals, private companies, and educational institutions. Preliminary evidence suggests that organizations with healthy canteens benefit from reduced employee sick leave and lower healthcare costs. Despite ongoing challenges, such as cost barriers for smaller vendors, the initiative aims to certify 1,000 canteens by 2027, enhancing nutritional health literacy and empowering Thais to make informed dietary choices to combat NCDs.

INTRODUCTION

In Thailand, a quiet yet far-reaching public health transition is taking place through a shift in dietary habits—not in hospitals or clinics, but in the everyday spaces where people gather to eat: workplace canteens. Unhealthy dietary habits, along with elevated body mass index and obesity, are major contributors to the rising burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs)—including cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and hypertension—according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2014). Globally, the scale of this issue is immense—in 2022, an estimated 1.28 billion adults aged 30–79 years were living with hypertension (WHO, 2022), while 2.5 billion people aged 18 and older were overweight, of whom 890 million were classified as obese (WHO, 2022).

These global trends are mirrored in Thailand, where the prevalence of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension has increased alarmingly. National Health Examination Surveys (Aekplakorn et al. 2008–2009 and Aekplakorn et al. 2019–2020) indicate that obesity (BMI ⩾ 25 kg/m2) among working-age Thais (15–59 years) increased from 34.7% in 2008–2009 to 42.4% in 2019–2020. Over the same period, the prevalence of diabetes jumped from 6.9% to 9.5%, and hypertension from 21.4% to 25.4%. These rising trends are largely attributable to dietary shifts towards foods high in fat, sugar, and salt. Compounding this problem is a reduced intake of fruits and vegetables, with Thais consuming an average of only 3.7 standard portions per day—falling short of the recommended five portions (WHO, 2003).

A POLICY PIVOT: THE HEALTHY CANTEEN INITIATIVE

To counter these trends, Thailand's Ministry of Public Health launched an ambitious initiative in 2020 to transform all of its workplace cafeterias into "healthy canteens"—a venue where safe, fresh, clean, and nutritious foods in appropriate nutritional quantities are served every day.

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Spearheaded by the Department of Health (DOH)'s Bureau of Nutrition (BON) and aligned with the WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety (2022–2030), the initiative focuses on transforming workplace canteens into environments that foster healthy eating habits among working-age individuals, starting with the public sector to set a national standard.

This initiative builds upon the pre-existing "healthy menus" concept, which has been operational since 2007. These menus must not only be safe, and free from harmful bacteria, viruses, parasites, chemicals, and toxins, but also adhere to strict nutritional guidelines set by the BON (BON 2020), which specify limits on energy, fat, sugar, sodium, protein, and dietary fiber in each meal, while prohibiting the use of monosodium glutamate (MSG) during cooking.

To receive healthy canteen certification, establishments must meet seven key criteria developed by the BON in collaboration with the Bureau of Water and Food Sanitation. These include:

- complying with the 2018 Ministerial Regulations on food safety, hygiene and sanitation standards
- providing at least one healthy menu per vendor
- ensuring the availability of at least one fresh fruit vendor.
- offering options for reduced sugar in beverages.
- displaying nutritional labelling on food items
- indicating sodium and sugar contents in condiments
- providing ongoing nutrition and food hygiene education for vendors and consumers

SCALING UP THROUGH MULTISECTORAL PARTNERSHIP AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

The first healthy canteen certification was awarded to the DOH's own cafeteria, and soon after, all 11 other canteens within the Ministry of Public Health were also certified. Recognizing the importance of multisectoral approaches—such as public-private partnerships—in the success of public health campaigns (Kraak and Davy 2022), the BON collaborated with both government and private sectors, including small food operators and vendors. From 2021 to 2023, the campaign expanded nationwide through a combination of online and on-site engagements, supported by Regional Health Centers 1–12, the Bangkok Metropolitan Health and Wellness Institute, Local Administrative Organizations, and Provincial Public Health Offices. This concerted effort resulted in a significant increase in the number of certified healthy canteens, from 81 in 2021 to 245 in 2023, as reported by Regional Health Centers.

A pivotal milestone of the initiative was the launch of the "Food4Health" mobile application in 2022. The platform digitized and integrated all components of the healthy menu certification process, including on-site canteen inspections, nutritional assessments, certification issuance, and dissemination through Regional Health Centers and Provincial Public Health Offices. This innovation reduced the certification approval period from approximately one month to less than ten minutes.

Food vendors can now apply for healthy menu certification by logging into the digital platform and submitting the required information, including an expression-of-interest form confirming voluntary participation, vendor details, and menu recipes with ingredient composition. The system automatically analyzes the nutritional content per serving and compares it with certification criteria based on the BON's nutritional guidelines. It then indicates whether the recipe meets the standards and, if adjustments are needed, provides specific recommendations on which ingredients to increase or reduce. Once approved, certification is valid for two years. One month before expiry, the system issues a notification prompting vendors to confirm whether the certified dish is still available and whether the recipe has changed. A new certificate is then issued accordingly, valid for another two years. Certified vendors are required to display health-promoting menus for consumers. They take pride not only in voluntarily participating in this program to enhance their business but also in contributing to the health of the community. In addition, the digital platform features a location "pin" function, allowing consumers to easily identify cafeterias and restaurants offering certified healthy menus.

Prior to this digital transformation, the healthy canteen certification process also required extensive on-site evaluations by officers from Regional Health Centers and Provincial Public Health Offices. Between 2020 and 2023, these teams conducted inspections across different regions using a survey, based on seven criteria, providing feedback for necessary improvements, and verifying compliance before granting two-year certification. In 2024, the process transitioned to an online system, enabling greater efficiency, reducing travel and operational costs, and freeing up time for innovative initiatives. Since then, the BON has overseen nationwide monitoring and evaluation of the digital certification system for both healthy menus and healthy canteens, ensuring a streamlined and effective process.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The strategic expansion of public-private partnerships continued into 2024, encompassing government agencies, private organizations, hospitals, and educational institutions. As a result, healthy canteens are now operational in Bangkok and all 76 provinces, with 373 canteens successfully certified by the end of 2024, achieving 92% of the annual target of 405.

The benefits of this initiative extend beyond nutrition. A recent report from the DOH indicates that companies with healthy canteens have experienced a reduction in employee sick leave and associated medical expenses (Bureau of Health Promotion, DOH, 2025). This highlights the broader economic and productivity advantages of adopting and promoting workplace nutrition and healthy cafeteria initiative.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite considerable progress, challenges remain. Some canteen operators—particularly small businesses—face budgetary constraints in meeting the food safety and hygiene standards required for certification and mandated by national regulations.

But the momentum is strong. The DOH remains committed to advancing the initiative nationwide, aiming to certify 1,000 healthy canteens by 2027. This ambitious target will be pursued through a collaborative, data-driven strategy

involving all government ministries, private enterprises, healthcare facilities, small businesses and secondary schools, supported by both online and on-site health literacy and nutritional education campaigns. Ultimately, the initiative reflects Thailand's commitment to empowering its population to make informed dietary choices—promoting healthier lives as they age and reducing the burden of NCDs.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS
Conceptualization: SaC and BT. Literature search: BT and SMH. Project administration: SC, SR, BT, SuC and LR. Project supervision: SaC, SR, BT. Writing—original draft: BT. Writing—review and editing: SC and SMH. All authors gave approval of the final version and consent for its publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING
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