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Provision of information to consumers about the calorie content of alcoholic drinks: did the Responsibility Deal pledge by alcohol retailers and producers increase the availability of calorie information?

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Alcohol is a significant source of dietary calories and is a contributor to obesity. Industry pledges to provide calorie information to consumers have been cited as reasons for not introducing mandatory ingredient labelling. As part of the Public Health Responsibility Deal (RD) in England, alcohol retailers and producers committed to providing consumers with information on the calorie content of alcoholic drinks. This study examines what was achieved following this commitment, and considers the implications for current industry commitments to provide information on alcohol calories.

Study design: Analysis of RD pledge delivery plans and progress reports. Assessment of calorie information in supermarkets and in online stores.

Methods: (i) Analysis of the content of pledge delivery plans and annual progress reports of RD signatories to determine what action they had committed to, and had taken, to provide calorie information. (ii) Analysis of the availability of calorie information on product labels; in UK supermarkets; and on online shopping sites and websites.

Results: No information was provided in any of 55 stores chosen to represent all the main UK supermarkets. Calorie information was not routinely provided on supermarkets' websites, or on product labels.

Conclusions: One of the stated purposes of the RD was to provide consumers with the information to make informed health-related choices, including providing information on the calorie content of alcoholic drinks. This study indicates that this did not take place to any significant extent. The voluntary implementation of alcohol calorie labelling by industry needs to continue to be carefully monitored to determine whether and how it is done.

Keywords: Alcohol; labelling; calories; evaluation; Responsibility deal; public health policy; obesity

Introduction

Alcohol is a significant source of calories in the diet of UK adults who drink, and a significant contributor to obesity.¹ On average alcohol provides 8.4% and 6.4% of energy intake for adults aged 19 to 64 years, and 65 years and over, respectively.² The 2015 Public Health England report on sugar reduction reports that alcoholic drinks are one of the main contributors to sugar in the adult diet.³ An analysis of data from the Health Survey for England also found that the mean alcohol calorie consumption was 27% of the recommended daily calorie intake in men, and 19% in women on their heaviest drinking day, with a positive association between calories derived from alcohol and obesity.⁴ This relationship has been found in other countries.^{5 6}

Weight for weight, alcohol and fat contain almost the same number of calories.⁷ The NHS Choices website states that a pint of lager has about the same calorie content as a packet of crisps, and that two large glasses of white wine would provide women with nearly 20% of their recommended daily calorie intake, as well as putting them over the recommended daily limit for regular alcohol consumption.⁸ However, no country in the world currently requires the calorie content of alcohol to be stated on packaging, though it is a measure being actively considered in Ireland.^{9 10} Martin-Moreno et al. (2013) have noted that consumers have less access to health and nutritional information about alcoholic beverages than they do about a glass of milk, a bowl of cereal or a soft drink.¹⁰ In the UK, 85% of consumers do not know the calorie content of a glass of wine.^{11 12}

A recent report European Commission report on the mandatory labelling of alcoholic beverages suggested that industry appears to be increasingly willing to adopt voluntary initiatives to offer nutritional information, citing commitments by some alcohol producers.¹³ However, relatively little is known about how and to what extent such pledges are implemented by alcohol producers in the UK or in other EU countries.

There is one possible source of evidence on this issue. Many alcoholic drinks producers and retailers committed to providing calorie information about alcoholic drinks, as part of the Public Health Responsibility Deal (RD) in England, which was launched in 2011 (See Box 1 and Table 1). The relevant voluntary pledge states: *"A3. Awareness of Alcohol Units, Calories & other information in the Off-trade: We will provide simple and consistent information as appropriate in the off-trade (supermarkets and off-licences) as well as other marketing channels (e.g. in-store magazines), to raise awareness of the units, calorie content of alcoholic drinks, NHS lower-risk drinking guidelines, and the health harms associated with exceeding the guidelines."* (See Box 2).

As part of a wider evaluation of the RD, we collected data on what action signatories to the pledge had taken. At that time (October 2014), 50 organisations had committed to this pledge, including all the main UK supermarkets, alcohol producers such as Diageo, Heineken and Molson Coors, and representative bodies such as the Wine and Spirit Trade Association (WSTA), and the British Beer & Pub Association.¹⁴

Supermarkets are a particularly important outlet for alcohol. Evidence given to the House of Commons Health Select Committee on alcohol in 2009 noted that one of the biggest changes in alcohol availability in recent decades has been purchasing from supermarkets at heavily discounted prices, and the use by supermarkets of alcohol as loss leaders to pull in customers.¹⁵ Off-trade alcohol sales, which includes off licenses and supermarkets, accounts for about two-thirds of the alcohol market in Great Britain.¹⁶

This analysis examines whether the RD pledge did result in the provision of information on alcoholic beverage calories to consumers.

Methods

(i) Analysis of RD pledge delivery plans and progress reports

Upon signing up to the RD, all organisations were asked to provide pledge delivery plans, setting out how they would deliver on each pledge they had selected. They were also asked to send annual progress reports to the Department of Health, setting out what they had achieved in the previous year. The delivery plans and annual progress reports were to be made publicly available on the RD website. All delivery plans (n=49) and progress reports (n ranged from 35 to 44) that were available up to September 2014 (i.e., including data from years 2011-2014) were downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis and coding. Many plans were missing; however, 86% of the 2013-14 delivery plans were available for analysis. Each delivery plan was coded independently by two researchers. A third researcher resolved any disagreements.

We coded the actions relating to the calorie pledge into five possible categories:

1. Organisation gives a specific commitment to provide information direct to consumer (e.g. to provide information on product labels);
2. Organisation refers to indirect or partial provision of information to consumer (e.g. that it will provide information on a website, in a customer magazine, or leaflet);
3. Organisation states that it will provide information, but not to public (e.g. by giving information to a wholesaler);
4. Organisation states no clear commitment to provision of information, or makes no mention of calorie labelling in the pledge delivery plan; or
5. No specific commitment appears to have been made, or it is unclear from the wording what the commitment is.

Data on any activity relating to alcohol calories were also extracted from the progress reports and tabulated.

(ii) Availability of calorie information on labels, in stores and online

We had previously collected labelling data on the top 100 alcohol brands, excluding own-brands. Details are published elsewhere.¹⁷ We used these data (collected in the first half of 2014) to estimate what proportion of products on UK shelves included calorie information (full details available elsewhere, but, in brief, these are labelling data from 156 individual product lines, from the top 100 alcohol brands for 2013, excluding own-label products¹⁷). This analysis was done separately from the analysis of provision of in-store and online information (see above).

Because of the wording of the pledge, it is possible that signatories may only have intended it to refer to in-store and online provision of information on alcohol calories. We therefore visited 55 stores in the South of England during June-September 2014 to assess what information on calories was provided in the alcohol sections of stores. The convenience sample included five city-based stores from each of Aldi, Asda, Co-Op, Lidl, Marks &

Spencer, Morrison, Sainsbury, Tesco, Waitrose, Spar, and Majestic Wine Warehouse. This represents all the supermarkets (and one major wine retailer, Majestic) which had signed the A3 pledge. We visited each aisle of the alcohol section including shelf edges and aisle ends, to look for labels, or leaflets or other signage.

Some pledge delivery plans refer to provision of information on websites, so during this period we also visited the online shopping websites (where available) of each supermarket to check what calorie information was provided on three specific alcohol products (white wine, beer and vodka; (47% of the top 156 products were either white wine, beer or vodka). At this stage we checked what information was provided about the calorie and unit content of any of these products (Table 1). We also searched elsewhere on the supermarket websites and on their Facebook pages, for information on alcohol calories.

Results

(i) Analysis of pledge delivery plans and progress reports

Pledge delivery plans: The detail of how signatories would deliver on the pledge to improve provision of information on alcohol calorie content was extracted from each delivery plan. Over half (28 signatories - 56%) made no mention of calories in their pledge delivery plans. Of those that did mention calories, two made a specific pledge to provide information directly to customers. Brand Phoenix Ltd committed to having the calorie claims added to all its 5.5% products within six months, and Molson Coors stated “*our beers' calorie content...is currently featured on our Carling (the UK's best-selling lager), Coors Light and Animée beers only. This still equates to over 80% of the beer brands we sell in the UK off trade*”. Many others included non-specific commitments e.g. “Calorie information will be introduced in due course”.

Overall, most (78%; n=39) pledge delivery plans fell into either Category 4 or 5, indicating that no specific pledge had been made, or it was not possible to tell what the specific commitment was (Table 2). Examples of pledges in these categories included ‘*We are exploring with our wineries how we can comply with calorific values on packaging during 2012*’ and “*We will provide information to our customers on units and calorie content of our products when requested to do so*”.

Progress reports: Progress reports were only available for a minority of signatories in 2012 and 2013, and for most signatories (86%) in 2014. Most progress reports (74%) did not mention alcohol calories.

Fourteen signatories mentioned calorie information but in most cases had not provided information direct to consumers, or only in a very limited fashion. For example, one retailer reported that it used several channels to raise awareness of alcohol calories, including its magazine. However only 1 of 65 articles mentioning alcohol on the relevant part of the website explicitly stated the calorie content of alcohol; two others briefly referred to alcohol being calorific.

The Drinkaware website was often (in 40% of cases) used by RD signatories as a way of referring customers to health-related information. Several retailers did include calorie information on their websites. Sainsbury included calorie content of its own brand wine, though not on all own brand alcohol products, and Co-Op provided calorie information on its own brand products. Molson Coors provided calorie information on Carling lager and Coors light (Animée beer, which had also included calorie information, is no longer sold in the

UK¹⁸). In one case, a method of calculating calorie content was provided by the signatory on a website, but appeared to require a high level of numeracy to understand (See Box 3).

(ii) Availability of calorie information on labels, in stores and online.

Two of 156 alcohol products examined (1.3%) reported calorie information on the label. No calorie information was present in the alcohol section of any of the 55 physical stores we visited (See Table 1). There was no information on the Facebook page of the stores under review. No calorie information was provided in the online shopping sections of any supermarket. Generally, there was no information about the calories in alcohol on other parts of their websites, or in the rare cases where calories in alcohol were mentioned, this was difficult to locate. In two cases, supermarkets stated in their delivery plans that they provided calorie information on their websites. In one, information about calories in alcohol appeared in a separate webpage that was not directly linked to the alcohol sales section of the main website, and did not give calorie information about specific alcohol products. The second supermarket provided information on calories in alcohol only in the Christmas edition of its customer magazine, but not on the website.

Discussion

Main findings

Alcohol contributes significant calories to the diet of even moderate drinkers, and provision of calorie information to consumers is a potentially important way of helping them reduce their calorie intake if they so wish. It also seems reasonable that consumers should be given this information in the same way as other foodstuffs. Nonetheless it is clear from these data that few of the organisations which committed to act on this issue as part of the RD had taken specific action to provide consumers with alcohol calorie information in either their physical or online stores. A minority of signatories provided alcohol calorie information on their websites, though the separation of the information from the point of purchase means that this information may be unlikely to be seen by consumers or purchasers. Calorie information appeared only on the labels of a very few branded products, and on a minority of own-brand products (e.g., Sainsbury supermarket provided calorie information on a range of its own-brand wines¹¹).

The Drinkaware website was often (in 40% of cases) used by RD signatories as a way of referring customers to health-related information. This has the major handicap as a source of consumer information of being dissociated from the immediate points of sale, and consumption.

What is already known on this topic, and what this study adds

The public is in favour of alcohol calorie labelling.¹⁸ Such labelling was excluded from EU law which only covers food and non-alcoholic drinks and requires that labels include ingredients and nutritional information. It has been suggested that the exclusion of alcohol is due to lobbying by the alcohol industry.¹⁹ This study finds that the voluntary pledge by industry to provide information on alcohol calories did not lead to any significant provision of such information to consumers. Subsequent to our data collection, several producers (including Diageo, AB InBev, and Treasury Wine Estates) have stated that they will begin to

provide calorie information on some products, though provision of information through websites rather than on labels appears to be the industry's preference.^{1 20 21 22} Even if calorie labelling were to be adopted voluntarily, the legibility and clarity of presentation of the information will require independent monitoring, as health-related information on alcohol product labels is currently unclear and/illegible in around half of products.^{23 17} For example, the drinking in pregnancy warning logo is smaller on products more likely to be drunk by women, and appears in a wide range of colours, with red - the traditional warning colour in the West – only used in 10% of cases.¹⁷ Therefore, if calorie information is to be provided more widely, it is important to assess not just whether this indeed takes place, but also how (e.g. in terms of the colour of text against the background, clarity and size of font) and where (front, back and position on label), and in what context (i.e. grouped with the other health information, or separated) it appears.

Limitations and strengths of study

The study's main limitation is the absence of many RD signatory progress reports, which means that progress may be under-reported. However, given that we also checked websites and physical stores as well as labels themselves during the same period, this seems unlikely. From a separate analysis of these reports,²⁴ it also appears that if progress was made in an earlier period, it tended to be mentioned again in later reports.

Our findings may not generalise to all stores across England, but given the total absence of provision of information in all 55 stores visited, it is unlikely that this is an artefact of the sample and may reflect a wider absence of information. The main strength of the study is the triangulation of data across many sources: the pledge delivery plans; the progress reports; physical stores; websites; house magazines; and online shopping sites. This gives a comprehensive picture of the lack of provision of calorie information to consumers. This anomalous position was noted in a leader article in "The Grocer" trade magazine, which supported the inclusion of calorie information on alcohol product labels.²⁵ The findings also raise questions about the likely effectiveness of a voluntary labelling regime, as recently recommended by the European Commission,²⁶ particularly if it simply results in information being presented on websites, rather than on labels or at the point of sale.

Conclusions

One of the stated purposes of the RD was to provide consumers with the information to make informed health-related choices, including in relation to the calorie intake associated with consumption of alcoholic drinks. This study indicates that this did not take place in the case of alcohol calorie information. Provision of information on alcohol products, including their calories, is not just a health issue, but also a matter of consumer rights. In August 2014, the Parliamentary All Party Group on Alcohol Misuse called for health warnings on all alcohol labels as a key measure to reduce alcohol-related harm, stating that "consumers should have the right to make informed decisions about the products they purchase...".²⁷ Provision of alcohol calorie information would contribute to this goal, as well as potentially contributing to measures to address the problem of adult obesity. The implementation of calorie labelling by industry needs to continue to be carefully monitored to determine whether and how it is done.

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Box 1: The Public Health Responsibility Deal

The Public Health Responsibility Deal (RD) was launched by the Department of Health in England in March 2011 as a public-private partnership involving voluntary agreements by businesses and public bodies in which they pledge to make public health-promoting changes in the four areas of food, alcohol, physical activity, and health at work (organised as four networks). The RD involves organisations committing to pledges to make changes within their organisation. The RD website (<https://responsibilitydeal.dh.gov.uk/about/>) states that it “embodies the Government’s ambition for a more collaborative approach to tackling the challenges caused by our lifestyle choices”.

One of the core RD commitments made by participating organisations is to “...foster a culture of responsible drinking, which will help people to drink within guidelines”.

**Box 2: Pledge A3: “What this pledge sets out to achieve, and why this is important
“(emphasis added)**

“This pledge will help raise people’s awareness and understanding of units, NHS lower-risk drinking guidelines, **the calorie content of alcoholic drinks** and the Chief Medical Officer’s advice on drinking during pregnancy.

This pledge commits off-trade retailers to provide unit and health information for consumers in off-trade premises.

The off-trade sells over 60 per cent of the alcohol consumed in the country. In the last 20 years the affordability of wines increased by 129 per cent and beer 153 per cent in the off-trade. In recent years more and more people have been drinking alcohol purchased from the off-trade before going out, as a way of saving money.

Improving awareness of alcohol **and calorie content** of drinks bought in the off-trade can help people make informed choices about when and how much they drink. It enables people to better measure their alcohol consumption and understand whether this is in line with lower-risk guidelines.”

Box 3: Wines of Interest Information leaflet on calories in wine

<http://www.winesofinterest.co.uk/acatalog/alcohol-units-and-calories.html>

Accessed 16th Sept 2014

“How do I work out how many calories there are in a glass of wine?”

Right – another maths lesson then...

1g of alcohol contains about 7 calories and 1ml of alcohol weighs 0.8g. So we first need to multiply the abv (alcohol by volume) percentage of the drink by the amount of liquid to find the amount of alcohol.

Let's use our 175ml glass of 13.5% abv wine we had earlier, this contains 23.625ml of alcohol since:

$175\text{ml} \times 13.5\%\text{abv} = 23.625\text{ml (of alcohol)}$.

23.625ml of alcohol is then multiplied by 0.8 to give 18.9g of alcohol which, multiplied by 7, is 132.3 calories

Had you chosen a 125ml glass of 12%abv wine you would have saved yourself about 48 calories since:

$125\text{ml} \times 12\%\text{abv} = 15\text{ml of alcohol}$ which, multiplied by 0.8 gives 12g of alcohol which, multiplied by 7 is 84 calories.”

Table 1: UK supermarkets' and retailers action on the A3 pledge on alcohol calories: summary of each pledge delivery plan, progress reports, and provision of instore, online and other information on alcohol calories

Supermarkets signed to pledge A3	Pledge Delivery plan		Summary of progress report	When buying individual product online: **		Calorie or health-related information elsewhere on website?
	Wording on calories	Type of pledge delivery plan *		Calorie info on product page? **	Unit or other health info on product page (e.g. CMO guidelines)?**	
Aldi Stores Ltd	"We will be continually talking to our off-trade customers advising them how to provide clear and consistent information on alcoholic units and calorie content of alcoholic drinks"	(3)	No mention of calories in progress reports	(i) No (Limestone Coast Chardonnay) (ii) No (iii) No (Tamova vodka)	Units/health info: (i) None (ii) None (iii) None	CMO health warning and information on units on website, link to Drinkaware; no calorie information. Nothing on Facebook page, or in store.
ASDA	"In 2012 we will work with the Department of Health on the introduction of calorie information "	(5)	No mention of calories in progress reports	(i) None (ii) None (iii) None	Units/health info: (i) ABV and units/bottle (ii) ABV only, no unit info (iii) ABV and units/bottle	No calories, units or other information in drinks section. One product, low alcohol Banrock Station chardonnay, displays calories/glass. Nothing on Facebook page, or in store.
Co-operative Group Ltd	"The Co-operative Group provides simple and consistent information on the labels of all own brand beer, wine, cider and spirits products about calorie content of drinks in addition to the information on units and NHS drinking guidelines. Calorie content has been included on own brand wine since 2002. "	(1)	Progress report notes that calorie content included on own brand wine since 2002	No full online shopping website; nothing on Facebook. However own brand wine, and some own brand beer have calorie info on product label. Some labelling information is "per 100ml only" not "per bottle".	No online shopping website.	Reports on website on corporate social responsibility mention the RD, units etc. 'Offers' leaflet on website includes drinkaware but not calorie information or units; food and drink pages does not include information on alcohol calories or units. No information in stores.
LIDL UK	"LIDL UK GmbH will, in close cooperation with other food retailers and as a member within the Retail Practices Subgroup of the Responsibility Deal Alcohol Network, keep itself informed of the latest updates and proposals to further the consumer awareness of alcohol units, calorie content , NHS drinking guidelines and health harms from excessive alcohol consumption".	(4) (LIDL will "keep itself informed")	No mention of calories in progress reports	Nothing on website wine section other than ABVs of wines; nothing in online wine leaflet: http://leaflet.lidl.co.uk/b35c67d3-08f6-43cd-ac91-2d01fffc2b64/#/1	ABVs only.	Nothing on Facebook page or in stores.

Supermarkets signed to pledge A3	Pledge Delivery plan		Summary of progress report	When buying individual product online: **		Calorie or health-related information elsewhere on website?
	Wording on calories	Type of pledge delivery plan *		Calorie info on product page? **	Unit or other health info on product page (e.g. CMO guidelines)?**	
Majestic Wine Warehouse			No mention of calorie labelling in pledge delivery plan	No calorie information.	Product descriptions include ABV and units/bottle.	Information on units and link to drinkaware on the CSR page http://www.majestic.co.uk/about/responsibility . Nothing on Facebook page or in stores.
Marks and Spencer	“Our website has a? comprehensive and popular health section which includes advice on sensible drinking http://health.marksandspencer.com/healthy-eating/alcohol . This covers NHS sensible drinking guidelines; a unit calculator; effects of drinking too much including calories and weight gain as well as other serious damage to your health and personal life...”	(2)	Progress report states that calorie information is included on website (see 4 th column->)	No calorie information on individual products (beer, wine, or vodka).	No unit or ABV information on individual products (beer, wine, or vodka).	The “Healthy eating website” with alcohol calculator etc mentioned in the pledge is not linked to the alcohol sales section of the M&S website, and it is not found by searching the main M&S website. No information in stores.
Morrisons	“Our customer magazine (published every two months with over one million copies distributed to stores) always features a Here to help page, which explains the unit content and calorie content of standard alcohol measures , such as a glass of wine or pint of beer”	(2)	Progress report mentions calorie information in customer magazine	No calorie information.	ABV and units/bottle for wine, ABV but not units for vodka; ABV, units/can, CMO warning, drinkaware link and responsibility message for beer	Beer, wine and spirits general section of website has no unit, calorie or other health-related information. Nothing on Facebook page or in stores. Past 12 issues of online magazine examined; no alcohol calorie or unit information on any drink product or mentioned in any drinks feature.
Sainsbury	“We will continue with existing activity and look for new opportunities to engage customers, particularly around the units and calories contained within alcoholic drinks ”.	(5)	Progress report: Calorie content included on own brand wine.	Calorie information: (i) No (ii) No (iii) No	Health/unit information (i) Unit content of bottle and ABV only (ii) ABV only (iii) ABV and units per bottle only	None in any of the drinks sections (beer & cider, spirits, wine) of stores. Searching for “calories” or “Drinkaware” or “alcohol calories” found nothing on 5/9/14. Some own brand wines included calorie information.
SPAR UK Ltd	No mention of calorie labelling in pledge delivery plan	(4)	No mention of calories in progress reports	No calorie info on website.	No detail of individual products.	Drink section of website has message: “Wine should be enjoyed responsibly. For the facts visit drinkaware.co.uk ”. No information in stores.

Supermarkets signed to pledge A3	Pledge Delivery plan		Summary of progress report	When buying individual product online: **		Calorie or health-related information elsewhere on website?
	Wording on calories	Type of pledge delivery plan *		Calorie info on product page? **	Unit or other health info on product page (e.g. CMO guidelines)?**	
Tesco plc	No mention of calorie labelling in pledge delivery plan	(4)	Progress report: "We have continued to use several channels to ensure that we raise awareness of alcohol units and calorie content. These include the Tesco Magazine (http://www.tescomagazine.com), the Tesco wine club magazine and our websites".	No calorie information for products	(i) Units/bottle and ABV only (Hardys Crest Chardonnay) (ii) ABV only, no units (iii) Units/bottle and ABV only	No information on calories, or other health information on main drinks section page. Nothing on Facebook page or in stores. Some information on calories appears in Tesco magazine, in an article about Christmas in 2013: www.tescoliving.com/health-and-wellbeing/healthy-eating/2013/november/know-your-units-this-christmas
Waitrose		(5)	No mention of calorie labelling in pledge delivery plan	No calorie info for any online product;	i) ABV and units/bottle only (ii) ABV only, no unit info (iii) ABV only; no unit info	Calorie information on labels of own brand products. No information in stores.

* Key: (1) Specific commitment to provide information direct to consumer (e.g. on labels); (2) Indirect or partial provision of information to consumer (e.g. website, magazine, leaflet); (3) Provision of information but not to public (e.g. to wholesaler); (4) No clear commitment to provision of information, or no mention of calorie labelling)

**Key: (i) White wine (Jacobs Creek or similar Chardonnay) (ii) beer (Stella Artois 440 can) (iii) Spirits (Smirnoff Vodka 70cl)

Table 2: Type of pledge to which organisation has committed

Type of pledge commitment	Number of signatories making that type of pledge (%)
1. Organisation gives a specific commitment to provide information direct to consumer (e.g. to provide information on product labels)	5 (10%)
2. Organisation mentions indirect or partial provision of information to consumer (e.g. that it will provide information on a website, in a customer magazine, or leaflet)	5 (10%)
3. Organisation states that it will provide information, but not to public (e.g. by giving information to a wholesaler)	1 (2%)
4. Organisation states no clear commitment to provision of information, or makes no mention of calorie labelling in the pledge delivery plan	35 (70%)
5. No specific commitment appears to have been made, or it is unclear from the wording what the commitment is	4 (8%)

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