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RESEARCH BULLETIN

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ADVERTISING BANS, FORBIDDEN FRUIT AND OBESITY

Advertising bans are blunt instruments that will not solve today's social problems. Indeed there is growing evidence that bans have the reverse effect of encouraging the "forbidden fruit tastes best" syndrome and consequently increase consumption.

People around the world are getting fatter and are in danger of succumbing to a diabetes epidemic that will bring about the early death of millions of people and huge costs to health budgets. The problem is worldwide with China claiming to be the 'overweight capital of the world' with 200 million people overweight. Australia and New Zealand have not escaped and according to the OECD about 21% of Australians and New Zealanders are obese and a further 35% overweight. Children and teenagers are also getting fatter as they eat more and exercise less with ever increasing numbers contracting diabetes.

The big question is what to do about it? Some public health groups and lobbyists advocate a simplistic solution of a ban on advertising seen by children with special focus on television advertising. CHOICE, the publication of the Australian Consumers' Association, is calling for "the Federal Government to do its bit and take action to improve regulation of food promotion – in all its forms – to children." Calls for a total ban on advertising food to children come from public health groups and politicians in both Australia and New Zealand on a regular basis. The Parliamentary Health Committee in New Zealand is currently conducting an Inquiry into obesity and has heard from a steady flow of submitters, including the New Zealand Medical Association, who advocate food advertising bans. One public health academic went further and suggested that not only should advertising of "unhealthy" food be prohibited within one kilometre of schools but also food outlets should be limited. Another suggested regulation of what supermarkets put on their shelves.

The real problem with such simplistic solutions of strict regulation and bans is that the evidence shows they do not work and will probably worsen the problem. Also the solutions are based on the assumption that advertising is a cause of obesity.

Research commissioned by the Foundation for Advertising Research (FAR) from Associate Professors Debra and Michael Harker of the University of Sunshine Coast in Queensland identified 32 different causes of obesity claimed by academic researchers worldwide. The causes range from decrease in the relative cost of food, increase in the relative cost of exercise, formula fed babies, watching television, mothers working, parental obesity and advertising.

There is no one cause of obesity and each of the attributed causes probably has some truth. However, the one cause that has most appeal to public health groups is to ban advertising in the naïve belief that this will solve the problem.

Yes there is evidence that advertising does influence food choice but to what extent? Estimates vary but, in general, such exposure accounts for only 2% of the variation in food choice/obesity. The influence of parents is put at many times this figure.

Every parent knows how difficult it is to manage teenagers. They are at a stage when they can make up their own mind and will exercise their independence at every opportunity. Rules will be tested and those that make no sense will be ignored – the forbidden fruit syndrome. Research has shown that the harsher and more arbitrary the rule then the greater is the temptation to break it.

Health groups often hold out Sweden as a regulatory model, which Australia and New Zealand should emulate. Sweden is big on advertising bans. It has had a total ban on advertising to children since 1989. But, according to a recent European Commission report by Christine Guittard, despite the 17-year advertising ban, childhood obesity is about the same as other EU countries and is continuing to rise at an alarming rate. Research from Sweden reports that the number of overweight children is doubling every decade. Clearly the ban is a failure.

For over 60 years Sweden and Norway have had a strictly regulated alcohol industry, which include advertising bans. In a recent report by the European Commission on the health, social and economic impact of alcohol in Europe, both Norway and Sweden received a rating of 18 out of a possible 20 on strictness of alcohol policy. At the other end of the scale was Greece at less than 6 – one-third that of Norway and Sweden. However the policy has clearly failed to curb the real problem in society today – binge drinking teenagers. According to the WHO Global Status Report on Alcohol 2004 17% of Swedish teenagers 15-16 were binge drinkers. For Norway the figure was 15%. By way of contrast only 9% of Greek teenagers 15-16 were binge drinkers. The rate in Australia was 10.7% but using a wider age range of 14-19 years. It is no doubt disappointing to public health advocates that teenage binge drinking in Sweden is 60% higher than in Australia.

The evidence is crystal clear - advertising bans and strict regulatory regimes do not work and indeed may have the opposite effect with teenagers acting as a “come on”.

The advocates of bans ignore research by psychologists and experts in children and teenager behaviour. Psychologist Professor David Benton of Swansea University found that restricting the access by children to a particular food actually increases preference to that food rather than decreasing it. Paediatrician Kyung Lee of the Boston University School of Medicine found that mothers who were strict disciplinarians raised children that were more than four times likely to be overweight than mothers that were respectful of the child’s opinion and nearly twice as likely to be overweight than children of neglectful mothers.

Simplistic solutions such as advertising bans and strict regulation, whether by law or “house rules”, are blunt instruments, which not only do not work but the evidence suggests have a reverse effect. If children, and more particularly teenagers, are denied products like Coca-Cola or a Big Mac hamburger, which is within their economic ability to obtain, then any prohibition as to access or advertising ban is likely to increase their desire. Forbidden fruit tastes best so children and teenagers will go to extraordinary lengths to obtain what is forbidden. Removing Coca-Cola from a school vending machine will encourage teenagers to buy it from the local dairy or supermarket even if it is more than one kilometre away. Prohibiting children from buying a Big Mac or Coca-Cola will almost guarantee they will consume them in quantity.

Advocates of bans and severe restrictions should look at the evidence before becoming so strident in their advocacy for, if they are successful, our children and teenagers will be even fatter.

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