



The impact of industry self-regulation on television marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to Australian children

Could recent initiatives in industry self-regulation be missing the mark?

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Across the world, reports by reputable scientific organisations have concluded that food marketing influences the types of foods that children want to eat, children’s requests for food purchases and, ultimately, the foods that children consume.¹ This type of evidence led to the National Preventative Health Taskforce’s recommendation to target food marketing to children as part of Australia’s strategy for tackling overweight and obesity.²

In 2009, industry groups introduced two voluntary initiatives to demonstrate their commitment to socially responsible marketing of foods to children: the Responsible Children’s Marketing Initiative (RCMI) and the Quick Service Restaurant Industry Initiative for Responsible Advertising and Marketing to Children. Signatories to these initiatives commit to refrain from advertising food and beverage products to children unless they represent healthy dietary choices (as per scientific or government standards), and the advertising message is in the context of a healthy lifestyle that incorporates good dietary habits and physical activity. We recently reviewed Australian studies to better understand the impact of these initiatives on the television advertising of unhealthy foods to children.³ Our systematic review was commissioned by the Australian National Preventive Health Agency.

We found that one of the challenges in this area is how to define “advertising to children”. Take for instance advertising regulations according to program classifications; there are limits on the ways companies can adver-

tise during programs with a “C” (children) classification. However, few children watch C programs; many more watch television early in the evenings when other programs are broadcast.⁴ Australian research that has examined food advertising at times when many children watch television has reported between 0.7 and 6.5 unhealthy food advertisements per hour.³ At first glance this level of exposure might seem trivial. However, when we consider that on average, Australian children watch about 2 hours of television per day, children’s overall exposure to unhealthy food advertisements may be between 511 and 4700 advertisements *every* year, and this figure reflects advertising only on television and not from other sources.⁵ This also highlights the financial interest that the food, advertising and media industries have in food advertising.

By separating the data further according to whether a company is a signatory to the 2009 industry initiatives, we learn that signatories may advertise unhealthy foods on television more than non-signatories. For example, the authors of one major report on food advertising provided us with additional analyses showing that in November 2011, signatories to the RCMI advertised unhealthy foods at double the rate of non-signatories (0.36 versus 0.17 per hour) at times when children are watching television. Industry groups will argue that the initiatives do not apply in this case because the data do not relate to advertising that specifically targets children or is shown during programs

that are developed for children. This distinction is pertinent; public health advocates are interested in reducing the unhealthy food advertisements that children see, not just those advertisements that specifically target children. From a public health point of view, these data are disappointing because they lower confidence in the usefulness of these initiatives in two ways. First, non-signatories to the initiatives have no obligation to address unhealthy food advertising to children, so they continue to advertise. Second, since signatories advertise at a higher rate than non-signatories when many children are watching television, the initiatives seem to be missing the mark as a socially responsible approach to the marketing of foods to children. One potentially positive finding is that the advertising of healthier fast foods has increased from 0 per hour in 2009, to 0.23 in 2010 and 0.26 in 2011.⁶ However, this must be contrasted against the higher rates of unhealthy fast-food advertising in the same period (1.29, 1.26 and 1.12 per hour, respectively). Disappointingly, researchers have identified a number of breaches of the industry initiatives and of the law governing advertising to children.⁷

Advertising is one part of our “food environment”. Given the high burden of disease attributed to poor dietary habits, it is important that we provide an environment that will support individuals to make healthier food choices. So does the community care about food advertising? Three reasonably large community surveys (over 1700 participants in each) conducted in South Australia revealed that 80%–90% of adults would support government regulation of the marketing of foods at times when children watch television.⁸ Stronger regulation of food advertising is also advocated by health and medical organisations. Despite the introduction of the industry initiatives and the widespread community support for regulation of food advertis-

ing, Australian children continue to be exposed to the advertising of unhealthy foods on television.

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