

CALL FOR LAWS TO BAN JUNK FOOD MARKETING

New legal controls, including cross-border laws, are needed to halt all marketing of junk food and soft drinks to children up to 16 years, according to new proposals from obesity experts.

The only promotions permitted to target children should be for foods which meet strict criteria for a healthy diet, says the International Association for the Study of Obesity's policy arm, the International Obesity Taskforce.

An IOTF working group is calling for legal steps as part of an international code on marketing to govern satellite as well as terrestrial television, along with guarantees that schools are keep 'commercial-free'. The recommendations form part of the 'Sydney Principles' which set out seven broad conditions which should underpin the development of global standards on marketing.

The World Health Organization in Geneva has agreed to implement an action plan to prevent obesity and non-communicable diseases, which includes the development of draft recommendations on marketing to children. WHO is scheduling consultations with industry, NGOs and governments before the end of the year and then will finalize its recommendations on marketing for health ministers to consider.

The IOTF report, just published in the journal Public Health Nutrition, is based on the working group's own consultation with consumer groups, NGOs, industry associations and ministries. It found that "self-regulatory

codes, by their nature, even if fully enforced, would not substantially reduce the large volume and high impact of marketing obesogenic foods and beverages to children.”

“Their reach appears to be limited and fragmented, especially in low-income countries, and, arguably, the undertakings by some large food companies to refrain from marketing to children are inconsistent and very limited in scope,” the report added.

The working group noted there was “very strong support for regulations to cover all commercial promotions, given that children are being increasingly targeted through a variety of marketing strategies such as sponsorships, competitions, loyalty schemes, websites, mobile phone text messages and viral marketing.” There was strong support to ensure commercial-free childhood settings.

Prof Boyd Swinburn, from Deakin University in Melbourne who led the IOTF working group, said that voluntary measures pledged by some sections of the food and beverage industries to refrain from marketing to under 12s did not go far enough.

Around 70% of those who responded to the IOTF felt restrictions should apply at least up the age of 16, with significant support to go further by adopting the ‘human rights’ definition in the United Nations Rights of the Child Convention which goes up to 18.

He acknowledged that the food and beverage as well as the advertising sectors objected to the statutory approach. “The Sydney Principles are

based on ethical values and how best to protect children and the rights of children to be free from commercial exploitation. This is where the discussion of marketing to children now needs to be centred.”

“The pledges by some companies to self-regulation are limited and self serving and these voluntary commitments do not apply across the board. There are many major companies that are not even signing up to these limited measures. This clearly demonstrates why there have to be strong global standards and why national governments need to implement these standards through legislation to ensure that all businesses comply,” added Prof Swinburn.

He said there was now a groundswell of support for a model international code on marketing to children, which had been prepared by Consumers International in conjunction with the IOTF and backed by IASO. The code, launched on World Consumers Rights Day in March, makes draft recommendations for WHO to consider in developing its final recommendations to health ministers. The code would restrict marketing of junk food and soft drinks to anyone under 16, but would allow the promotion of foods which have a ‘healthy’ nutritional profile.

In the UK Ofcom, the government regulatory agency, has introduced restrictions on advertising to children under 16, but only where they form the majority of the audience. Ofcom was criticized for not curbing advertising around prime time viewing where children form a large part of a mixed audience with adults. The rules do not affect internet and mobile phone promotions which are becoming increasingly popular commercial techniques for targeting youngsters.

Sweden and Norway do not allow advertising of any kind to children under 12 as part of their standard controls on commercial television, but satellite broadcasting bypasses national regulation. Sweden's bid to revise the EU 'Television Without Frontiers' directive to provide greater control over cross border advertising was thwarted when it held the European presidency in 2005. In April 2008 the EU Commissioner for Information Society and Media Vivian Reding promised there would be no further regulations restricting advertising in Europe.

"The Sydney Principles reflect the basic rights of children and they should be the yardstick by which we measure the actions of governments and food companies to protect those rights" said Professor Swinburn.

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The seven 'Sydney Principles' to reduce commercial marketing to children

1. SUPPORT THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN to safe, nutritious food
2. PROVIDE SUBSTANTIAL PROTECTION TO CHILDREN from commercial exploitation
3. BE STATUTORY IN NATURE to ensure a high level of protection for children
4. TAKE A WIDE DEFINITION OF COMMERCIAL PROMOTIONS to encompass all types of commercial targeting of children
5. GUARANTEE COMMERCIAL-FREE CHILDHOOD SETTINGS such as schools and child care facilities
6. INCLUDE CROSS-BORDER MEDIA in international regulatory agreements
7. EVALUATE, MONITOR AND ENFORCE the regulations

Links

Sydney Principles website

<http://www.ionf.org/sydneyprinciples/index.asp>

International Code on Marketing of Food and Beverages to Children:

<http://ionf.org/documents/ConsumersInternationalMarketingCode.pdf>

Consumers International

http://junkfoodgeneration.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=64

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

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