

15/05/08

SUBMISSION TO THE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND AGEING

ON THE

INQUIRY INTO OBESITY IN AUSTRALIA

BY THE

FOUNDATION FOR ADVERTISING RESEARCH

1. The Foundation for Advertising Research (FAR) requests to be heard by the Committee.

Background

2. FAR was formed in 2005 and has as its main objective the provision of information, research, expertise and advice on various aspects of advertising and marketing to assist policymakers to make evidence based decisions and policy. In the furtherance of that objective in 2006 FAR commissioned the University of the Sunshine Coast to conduct a major review of the research, literature and evidence relating to obesity, diet, exercise and advertising with particular emphasis on Australia and New Zealand. The Report is comprehensive and took over eight months to complete. To the best of our knowledge it is the most comprehensive study of its kind that is Australia focused, and it therefore is directly relevant to issues before the Inquiry.

The University of the Sunshine Coast was selected for this research because of the expertise of Associate Professors Debra Harker and Michael Harker who, in our view, are the current world leading academics on advertising issues. They are well published in academic journals. In addition Debra Harker was on the Board of the Australian Consumers Association for six years until 2005 and for the last three years was its Deputy Chairman.

3. The research report entitled "**Advertising's Role in Diet and Exercise in Australia and New Zealand: Developing a Research Agenda**" is attached. The report provides a full review and summary of the research on the issues before the Committee.

KEY FINDINGS

Causes of Obesity

4. The basic cause of obesity is quite simple as it is the imbalance of 'energy in' and 'energy out'. (p63) The balance is quite delicate but if 'energy in' in the form of food is greater than 'energy out' in the form of exercise then there is inevitable weight gain.

However the underlying reasons, which in the opinion of various researchers are causes or drivers of this imbalance, are many and varied. The table (p66/67) lists 32 different reasons under the headings Energy In – Consumption, Energy Out – Exercise, Family Issues, Genetics and Technological Changes. It will be noticed from the table that there is relatively little research on the issues of Energy Out – Exercise and Genetics.

Among the 32 reasons are the decrease in the relative cost of food, increase in the relative cost of physical activity, fast food advertising, giving up smoking, formula fed babies, watching television, parental obesity and mothers working.

5. Another feature is that the phenomenon is global (p57, 58, 62) and even occurs in rapidly developing countries such as China, which now claims to be the "fat capital of the world", with an estimated 200 million overweight people. (p58).

2. Television Advertising and Television Watching

6. Reviews by Hastings, Zywicki and Young emphasise there is only limited evidence to support the conclusion that advertising per se is the root cause of increasing purchase of unhealthy foods. (p71) When that literature is taken into account with various critiques the evidence supports two main thrusts:

"1. That television advertising affects children's food choice in a modest way, and

2. That most television food advertising is for unhealthy products." (p72)

7. Sedentary activity such as television and associated food advertising is sometimes cited as a cause of obesity. Various studies lead to the conclusion that weight gain is not due to television viewing per se but a combination of:

- *"The sedentary nature of television viewing which decreases metabolic rates and is a time substitute for other healthier activity;*

- *The creation of a positive energy balance from the frequent snacking, pre-prepared meals and/or food and soft drink consumption during television viewing;*
- *Increased television viewing time offering increased possible exposure to food and soft drink product advertisements.” (p74)*

8. After reviewing the evidence the authors conclude, *“Thus the jury is still out on the question of whether sedentary behaviour, time in front of the screen, is strongly related to weight gain”.* (p75) Also *“Academic research and reviews reveal limited but statistically significant direct effects of television advertising on food preference, purchase requests and consumption. There is insufficient evidence to determine the relative size of the effect of television advertising on food and soft drink choice in comparison to other relevant factors.”* (p81)

With regard to the influence on children the conclusion is *“There is a quite modest body of evidence demonstrating the direct effect of food and drink promotion (in the main television advertising) on children’s preferences, knowledge and consumption. However, since this evidence explains only a small amount of the variance, it is likely that other factors can be identified which have greater effect.”* (p86)

3.Sedentary Activity

9. The nature of sedentary activity is changing with technological advances and children do not watch as much television as their parents and grandparents. Persons aged 55+ watch about twice as much television as children 5-12 (p136). Furthermore there is evidence that television watching is diminishing (p136). Children are spending time in front of various screens - television, computers, video games and cinema. However Australian research found that an association between fatness and screen time explains *“less than 1-2% of the variance in fatness and they are relatively insignificant”* (p132).

Eating Habits

10. Nearly half (47%) of Australians’ expenditure on food outside the home is in restaurants, followed by pubs, clubs and nightclubs (19%). Takeaways have a 9% share and cafes 6%. (p114).

5. Advertising and Obesity

11. There is little or no correlation in the number of food advertisements on television and obesity rates. Australia has 12 food ads per hour and has an overweight/obesity rate of 58.4%. New Zealand has 12.8 ads per hour and an overweight/obesity rate of 56.2%. On the other hand Greece has 7 food

ads per hour and the overweight/obesity rate is about the same as Australia. Reference should be made to the table on p138.

12. China has a serious and increasing problem with obesity but has traditionally low levels of advertising and restricted fast food outlets. (p63)

13. There is also evidence from Europe and United States that advertising expenditure is in decline but obesity levels are increasing. (p140)

14. With regard to a ban on advertisements in children's television viewing time the report concludes that it is "*a policy that has little merit*". It suggests that media literacy is a better option as it empowers consumers. (p159)

Intervention Strategies

15. The Report recognises that obesity is a serious problem that needs appropriate intervention strategies. The authors conclude that obesity is not caused by the traditionally viewed problem of overweight individuals being 'lazy' or 'having no will power' but stems mainly from the interaction of individuals with their environment. "*The environment in this context is the circumstances in which we live and has been termed the obesogenic environment*". (p142) Thus "*If obesity is driven by the environment, then our main focus for intervention should be environmental change, not individual will-power*". (p142)

16. "*An environmental approach to obesity prevention takes all influences on obesity into consideration*" and "*focuses more on the changeable aspects of an environment rather than the changeable aspects of an individual. Environment-based interventions do not tell people how to eat or exercise, or present dire warnings for non-compliance; they simply try to make it easier for people to eat, exercise and live in healthy ways.*" (p142)

17. The Report recommends eight Principles of Intervention within which various strategies can be devised. These principles, and discussion on them, are found on pages 144 – 163 and provide a useful framework for the Committee in designing intervention policies.

18. FAR submits that a Principle approach to intervention as outlined in the Report should be adopted. It would eliminate ad hoc ideas, that sound appealing but have no solid evidential support, from being introduced and then failing in their objective. When this occurs it undermines the credibility of the entire policy. It is interesting to note that Gerard Hastings in his book published in 2007 entitled "*Social Marketing - Why Should The Devil Have All The Best Tunes*" included a chapter about the Eight Principles written by the authors of the Report.

The importance of measuring the likely success of Intervention Strategies before they are implemented is of critical importance.

19. We therefore submit that suggested Intervention Strategies be measured against the Eight Principles prior to adoption and implementation.

Evidence and Research

20. It is very difficult to design policy to combat the growing problem of obesity when there is a lack of strong evidence on which to base the policy. There is an urgent need for a research program, which produces "*stronger evidence for and against the many claims made, leading to better informed policy and action.*" (p167)

21. The various areas and topics that require to be researched are listed on pages 167 - 176. This will require a coordinated approach by Government, industry and academia. Currently research tends to be areas of interest of the researcher and therefore ad hoc.

22. FAR therefore submits that a coordinated tripartite approach be adopted to research.

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