

Just Chew It: ban sports making millions from junk food, say experts

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Australian public health experts contacted by Crikey say sports sponsorship by fast-food giants KFC and McDonald's and the like should be banned. They also believe sports stars should be banned from endorsing foods that are unhealthily high in fat and sugar.

"We should start with a ban on unhealthy food sponsorship of children's sport," says Jane Martin, of the Obesity Policy Coalition, "as this is the most urgent issue. Following this should be a ban on all junk-food sponsorship of sport.

"We should ban junk food and alcohol sponsorship of sport and we should ban sports people from advertising these products at other times and through any medium," says Sydney University's professor Stephen Colagiuri, one of the government's expert advisers on diabetes.

"It has been done for smoking and the same rules could be applied for alcohol and junk food."

Professor Sandra Jones—co-author of the report *I Eat Milo To Make Me Run Faster*—agrees: "We can and should prohibit the sponsorship of children's sport by fast-food companies and manufacturers of nutritionally poor foods (i.e. those that are high in fat, salt and/or sugar) ... because we are talking about children and the development of food-related attitudes and behaviours that have the potential to influence their health and well-being for the rest of their lives.

"The same applies to sponsorship by sporting celebrities," says professor Jones, who is one of the leading experts on food marketing to children. "Not only are these role models extremely influential ... the association of sport with certain foods [via sponsorship/celebrity endorsement] also misleads children into believing that the advertised foods are healthy and even necessary for sporting performance."

But could sport exist without this money? "Absolutely," says professor Colagiuri, "The end of the sporting world did not occur when the tobacco

bans were introduced and many top level sporting events survive without junk food company sponsorship or advertising.”

The campaigner who led Australia’s fight against tobacco sponsorship of sports, professor Simon Chapman, who also favours a ban, agrees.

“The refrain that sports will lose money when a category of advertiser or sponsor has to exit the playing field can be tested against the historic record of what happened with the demise of tobacco advertising. It went from radio and TV in September 1976, and then from print and sporting sponsorship in the early 1990s. If there is any graph showing that there was the slightest dip in total advertising receipts in any medium following these bans, they have yet to be paraded. The fight to retain tobacco advertising was protracted and vicious, so data like that would have been gold. It just doesn’t exist, because plenty of other products lined up to fill the gaps.

“The Marlboro Open became the Ford Open and later the Kia Open ... And guess what, cricket, football, tennis and racing didn’t die.”

Crikey’s investigation of sports sponsorship by food companies suggests a 20/20 rule applies, at least in the case of the AFL and Cricket Australia.

Roughly 20% of those sports’ total revenue comes from sponsorship, and roughly 20% of that sponsorship money comes from food companies. That means as little as 4% of total revenue might be at risk from a ban. Yet food companies get massive promotional exposure for this modest outlay.

The figures at grassroots level appear similar. According to the NSW Cancer Council’s Kathy Chapman, co-author of a 2010 study into sponsorship of children’s sport, “Of 347 sponsors identified in junior sports clubs, only 17% were food or beverage companies. And for most clubs, less than a quarter of their income came from sponsorship, so it is a relatively small proportion of their income base, even though it provides major promotional opportunities to sponsors.”

Crikey asked Sports Minister Mark Arbib whether he was in favour of a ban. Having effectively said he was not and that he believed “the key to tackling childhood obesity is to get kids active and away from the television or PlayStation,” he flicked us on to Health Minister Nicola Roxon. Crikey went to her office for comment but didn’t get a reply before deadline.

We didn’t feel the need to ask Tony Abbott who, as Health Minister in the Howard government, dismissed concerns about food marketing to children

raised by the ABC's Four Corners:

TONY ABBOTT: It's a pretty sad view of humanity to think that we are in some way programmed by the stuff we see on television.

TICKY FULLERTON: What about children under eight?

TONY ABBOTT: Well, children under eight normally eat what their parents give them. And if their parents are foolish enough to feed their kids on a diet of Coca-Cola and lollies, well, they should lift their game, and lift it urgently. Health experts don't buy the Abbott argument—shared by many—that it's the parents' responsibility. "Absolutely not," says professor Colagiuri. "It's impossible for children to avoid these advertisements—the bombardment of viewers with these ads during the recent England-Australia cricket series was outrageous—parents would have had to sit with their children the whole time with remote control poised to ensure that their children were not exposed.

"It's tough for parents to constantly resist children's pestering for unhealthy food and they need to be supported," says the Obesity Policy Coalition's Martin. "Endorsements by sporting heroes fuel children's pestering, and make it much harder for parents. Junk-food companies and sporting bodies need to take some responsibility, and not pin it all on parents.

"The truth is that our children are being ruthlessly exposed to junk-food marketing," says Michael Moore, of the Public Health Association of Australia, which also wants a ban on junk-food companies advertising to children and sponsoring kids' sports. "Junk food marketing ... is contributing to a situation where, for the first time, we are facing the distinct possibility that this generation of children will live shorter lives than their parents. The Australian government must act now to prevent such a tragic and avoidable outcome for our kids."

But what might be the health and financial benefits of a ban? The short answer is that it could save the taxpayer hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars in medical bills and health spending, provided it reduces the incidence of obesity.

"Clearly obesity is multifactorial and multisectoral," says professor Colagiuri, "But such a ban would send a clear message that we are now serious about addressing the problem. Reduction in smoking involved many interventions over many years and the same will be necessary to combat the obesity

epidemic. An advertising ban would be one of many steps and strategies.

“Restricting sports sponsorship and junk-food advertising, would help break the connection between junk food and sports that food companies have created,” says Martin. “This would be likely to have substantial impact on overweight and obesity rates over time, as part of a package of measures to address the obesity problem.”

Nine years ago, the UK’s Food Standards Authority published a horrifying report about the epidemic of childhood obesity in the UK. Shortly afterwards, the respected medical journal, The Lancet, called for a ban on sports stars advertising junk food. Almost a decade later, Britain is seeing more of it than ever.

The same will happen here unless action is taken. So how to make it happen? The Cancer Council’s Kathy Chapman urges people to lodge complaints through Junkbusters “so we can collectively have a louder voice on this issue”.