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Disunited nations

EFFORTS TO CURB THE POWER OF JUNK-FOOD PRODUCERS ARE BEING STYMIED IN HIGH PLACES, WRITES Michelle Bridges.

I smell a rat. One high in saturated fats, and encrusted in salt and sugar. A trans-fat rat, in fact.

In September, the United Nations General Assembly met to address the problem of the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the developing world. The delegates adopted a declaration calling for a campaign to curb by 2013 the risk factors behind four of the leading NCDs: cancer, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease and diabetes. These risk factors include tobacco use, unhealthy diet, harmful use of alcohol and physical inactivity.

Alarmingly, every year, NCDs account for 36 million deaths out of a worldwide figure of 57 million deaths. Most of these deaths occur in developing countries, and it was these countries who led the charge for change at the United Nations meeting.

Proposed solutions include tax measures, changes in pricing and labelling, and the curbing of marketing to children via TV of foods and beverages high in saturated fats, trans fats, sugars and salt. The delegates also sought ways to promote overall healthy lifestyles and increase physical activity.





It's a complicated issue, but one that is being taken very seriously by many nations of the world. However, there are rats in the ranks. Far from endorsing these responsible initiatives – reining in the production and marketing of unhealthy foods, for instance – some countries lobbied to dilute them by seeking the removal of a paragraph within the declaration that agrees to implement controls on junk-food manufacturing. The paragraph in question promotes cost-effective interventions to replace saturated fats and trans fats in fast foods, reduce salt and refined sugars in foods, and discourage the production and marketing of unhealthy foods.

And which countries were lobbying to have this paragraph removed? Well, our country for one. Australia teamed up with the United States and Canada to support the junk-food industries at the expense of the health of those in poorer nations as well as their own.

The director of the World Health Organisation's Collaborating Centre for Obesity Prevention at Deakin University, Boyd Swinburn, says Australia is diluting an important policy document and failing to offer leadership to developing nations adversely affected by NCDs.

But we're also failing ourselves. The junk-food manufacturers' marketing budgets will always swamp great initiatives like the federal government's current "Swap It – Don't Stop It" campaign – a call to make easy, small lifestyle choices to reduce the risk of illness and disease. And when that same government appears to act as the lapdog of junk-food big business, it only has the effect of amplifying the manufacturers' marketing efforts.

Michelle Bridges is an author and a trainer on The Biggest Loser.

michelle's tip

Write to the federal Department of Health to express your outrage and demand change. But before you do, take stock of what you're putting in your mouth and how much you're exercising each week. We owe it to ourselves, and to our kids

