



Fat chance of breaking junk food grip

Health advice is being ignored in favour of big business, writes **Mark Metherell.**

As the smoke rises from the battle over plain-pack cigarettes, a dark contest between healthy policy and healthy profits burns on.

The federal government points to its pioneering legislation to make cigarette packs a uniform and anonymous dull brown as evidence of its will to take on the cancerous global industry in the interests of people's health.

But the year ends with a rash of other pivotal decisions on food labelling, medicine regulation, gene patents and junk-food advertising in which the government has overridden persuasive arguments and sided with business.

A trial of "traffic-light" food labels was recommended by a respected former Labor health minister, Neal Blewett, officially appointed to head an inquiry into the matter after years of government prevarication. Most health groups strongly supported him.

But after a year of heavy lobbying by the food industry, state and federal governments are avoiding Blewett's recommendations like the plague.

The red, amber and green markings on packaged food could provide a quick and easy guide for consumers, pointing them towards healthier food choices.

Obesity, cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes and cancer are all diet-related triggers of disease and early death. The curse of plentiful rich food may mean that young Australians become the first generation in a long time to live shorter lives than their parents.

But the campaign to dampen appetites for fat, sugar and salt, particularly among children, drew a limp response from the Australian Communications and Media Authority on junk-food television advertising.

On another health front, recommendations to tighten the regulation of "alternative", often ineffective, medicines have been either put on

hold or delayed, despite a decade of expert calls for action.

Central proposals for the labelling of unproven products as "untested" and tougher controls on the numerous snake-oil entrepreneurs in the sector have been either delayed or referred for yet more consultation with industry.

And on gene patents, the federal government has come down in favour of recognising ownership rights for naturally occurring genetic material in the wake of the fierce campaign by the biomedical industry. It's a decision which stands to impede access to genes for diagnostic and other purposes, while protecting the right of biomedical companies to extract higher returns for life-saving technology.

The feature of all these developments is the evidence that governments feel obliged to bow to commercial arguments, even in the face of expert health advice and public opinion.

The parliamentary secretary for health, Catherine King, who is responsible for food and therapeutic matters, insists the government is not sacrificing people's health to appease big business.

"I would reject that. I think the government has never been afraid to take on industry," King says. Look at the government's record on taking on the resource companies on the mining tax and big tobacco on plain packaging, she says.

The response by global tobacco companies to the prospect of a precedent that removes their brands has been a barrage of High Court lawsuits. The tobacco companies say there is no evidence to support the government's argument that blank packets would stifle the use of killer cigs.

Their claim echoes the argument King cites on the traffic-light food labels – that there is no evidence they would work to reduce the consumption of killer foods.

The health advocates challenge that view, pointing instead to a significant study in Australia which showed that consumers using a traffic-light label system were "five times more likely to correctly identify healthier food products", compared with the current monochrome daily intake system.

The British supermarket chain

Sainsbury's, which stamps traffic lights on 8000 of its own-brand products, has told a House of Lords inquiry that it experienced significant increases in sales of "healthy" meals like salmon and tarragon, which score mainly green traffic lights, compared with its moussaka, which rates mostly red lights.

Sainsbury's has extended its "green" stamp of approval to the meals that include at least one green vegetable.

The House of Lords committee report noted: "We invite the government to explain why their policy on food labelling and marketing of unhealthy products to children is not in accordance with the available evidence about changing behaviour."

King says she did not see data to persuade her of the House of Lords' view in Britain.

She does, however, advance another argument to bolster her case – the need to balance consumers' interests with that of "an innovative food industry".

Clearly, she says, there are "balances" and "competing interests" the government has to "take into account". These are the words of a junior office-holder in a government which has been knocked around by the mining industry and now faces an international campaign by the tobacco industry. A high-profile serve against traffic lights from the food industry would not be palatable.

King, who visited Britain earlier this year to assess evidence on food labels, says multiple forms of traffic lights have been introduced in Britain because it has been voluntary.

"I think it was not conclusive that the evidence supports a reduction in unhealthy food consumption," she says.

Sue Davies, the chief policy adviser of the British consumer group Which?, met King during her visit and says she advanced the case for traffic lights to her.

Davies says an independent review commissioned by Britain's Food Standards Agency showed that "when you test different nutrition-labelling formats, those with traffic-light labels work best".

Traffic-light labelling was used not only by Sainsbury's but also by other British retailers, including





Asda, Marks & Spencer, Waitrose and the Co-operative. It is also used by some manufacturers, including McCain.

New European Union food-labelling rules were agreed to this year and some hoped for wider adoption of traffic lights.

Davies says she made these points to King. "It is a great shame that the Australian government will not be pushing the use of traffic lights," she says.

A central player has been Kate Carnell, the ardent voice of Australia's \$108 billion food industry.

A former Liberal chief minister of the ACT, Carnell has sought to portray the traffic lights not only as "simplistic" but as hazardous to health, giving the example of sugary soft drinks scoring three green lights and one red for sugar, while milk would trigger three ambers (fat, saturated fat and sugar) and one green light for salt.

"Using traffic lights, the soft drink appears to be a healthier option, which, of course, is wrong," says Carnell, who is the chief executive of the Australian Food and Grocery Council.

Such arguments have been dismissed by advocates as wrinkles that could be overcome. But they were good enough to convince the Nationals, who are apparently fear-

ful for the future of Australia's sugar and dairy industries.

On the other side of the fight is an old sparring partner, Michael Moore, who was an independent but also health minister in Carnell's government. These days, Moore heads the Public Health Association of Australia and says Carnell plays a big role in pulling government onto the food cart.

The government is leaving open the possibility of considering an alternative approach, using a star-rating system to indicate a food's health status. But Moore says this would likely be inferior and less specific than the traffic lights.

He says he is uneasy about the more recent trend "to prioritise business over community health".

"We understand economic realities. However, in recent decisions on food labelling, warning labels on alcohol and reforms on medicines, [governments] seem to have moved much closer to the industry perspective," Moore says.

"The effective labelling of food is not just about adults. There is overwhelming evidence that our children are becoming more obese and it is incumbent upon us as a society to take every action possible to deal with the epidemic of poor nutrition and obesity."

The senior policy adviser for the

Obesity Policy Coalition, Jane Martin, also voices concern at the way the government's bid to seem reasonable to all sides ends up trapping it in the grip of industry.

"What we're seeing is a lot of background activity in terms of commissioning research, setting up panels, taking submissions and preparing reports," she says.

"But when it comes to taking the next step, putting it into practice, there's a distinct lack of willpower.

"The government has made a huge investment in obesity prevention programs but, without policy and regulatory reform, all this work and investment is being undermined. They're pushing against the tide."

Matt Levey, a spokesman for the consumer group Choice, said what the traffic-lights saga had shown was "that no matter how much evidence there is to support change, if industry does not like it, if they create a 'divergence of views', it may not go ahead".

"At what point does the right to put a view – whether from industry, health or consumer groups – become a right of veto over unfriendly outcomes? And more to the point, why conduct a major review of anything if you're going to ignore the majority of the results?" he asks.



