



Shielding kids from junk food ads

The Greens have introduced a bill that would ban ads for HFSS (high fat, salt and sugar) food in both children's and family-time TV. **F&DB** discusses responses to the proposed legislation.



THE GREENS' *Protecting Children from Junk Food Advertising (Broadcasting and Telecommunications Amendment) Bill 2011* seeks to ban HFSS food ads on commercial television from 6am to 9am and 4pm to 9pm on weekdays and from 6am to 12pm and 4pm to 9pm on weekends and school holidays, as well as banning junk food ads from pay-TV services aimed at children. It would also prohibit the use of internet and digital services such as SMS and email to promote junk food to children.

The bill is being supported by the Australian Medical Association (AMA) representing over 27,000 doctors, the Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC), the Australian Chronic Disease Prevention Alliance, and the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children.

In March last year, the Greens attempted to in-

roduce a similar bill, which was defeated in the Senate (28 votes to six) and failed to win support from the Opposition or the Gillard government.

Under the voluntary Responsible Children's Marketing Initiative (RCMI) that is currently in place, the majority of leading food and beverage companies have committed not to advertise HFSS products to children under the age of 12.

Independent research commissioned by the AFGC found that only 2.4 per cent of advertising on children's TV was for HFSS foods between March and May 2010. The AFGC claims these ads were primarily placed in error by agencies in bonus advertising slots.

"The simple fact is there are virtually no ads for HFSS foods on children's TV and in all other forms of media," Carnell says.





LOOPHOLES IN THE SAFETY NET

The AFGC study reviewed advertising in programs classified as either P (preschool) and C (children) as well as some family movies. However, the Obesity Policy Coalition (OPC), which includes VicHealth, Diabetes Australia and Cancer Council Victoria, claims the study only covered a "very small amount" of the television watched by children.

It notes that shows such as *The Simpsons*, *Modern Family* and *Junior Masterchef*, which are some of the highest-rating programs watched by children, were not included in the AFGC report.

"When unhealthy food can be advertised during popular children's TV shows, such as *Junior Masterchef*, and junk food companies have the ability to directly market to children online, then you'd have to say the loopholes are bigger than the safety net that self-regulation is meant to provide," says Jane Martin, senior policy advisor for the OPC.

The South-Australian government has released research, which it says shows that voluntary limits on HFSS food advertising to children are not working. The study monitored TV shows watched by the largest numbers of children between 6pm and 10pm. It found that there were 11 HFSS ads during the screening of *The Simpsons Movie* in March 2010; eight during *Undercover Boss* in July 2010; and 15 during *Australian Idol* in October 2009.

South Australia's Minister for Health and Ageing John Hill claims there's been no clear change to the pattern of advertising by the food manufacturers that signed the RCMI.

"The key problem is that the voluntary self-regulation is restricted to children's and some general programs when in reality children watch a much wider range of programs," Hill says.

FAMILY TELEVISION

The AFGC says the new bill is "over-the-top" and amounts to censorship.

"I don't quite know how this 'Big Brother' approach will work - this is the 'nanny state' gone crazy," AFGC chief executive Kate Carnell says.

The council accepts that HFSS advertising should be avoided during children's television, however, it asserts that banning this type of advertising during family television would amount to censorship.

"Clearly this Bill is not about advertising to children but advertising to families," says Carnell. "Surely Australian families - and 15 year-olds - can make a decision about what a healthy

diet looks like for them without having food advertisements banned."

If the responsibility for children's exposure to HFSS advertising during family television lies with parents rather than industry, it would be logical to suggest that their opinions on the matter should be considered.

Consumer research by the Cancer Council SA found that 93 per cent of respondents were in favour of the government introducing stronger restrictions to reduce the amount of unhealthy food and drink advertising seen by children, with 79 per cent strongly in favour. When asked what most commonly negatively impacted their children's food purchase requests, 36 per cent of grocery buyers said television commercials.

Cause and effect

One in four Australian children is obese but, while it is clear this issue needs to be urgently addressed, the link between HFSS food ads and childhood obesity has not been clearly established.

A recent study by the Productivity Commission claimed that it is "difficult to discern a relationship between advertising and body weight".

The report says: "...A number of studies have found a link between TV viewing and obesity, but the size is usually modest and causation has not been established.

"In addition, it is difficult to isolate the effect of advertising from other factors that affect the TV viewing and obesity relationship, such as the sedentary nature of TV viewing."