



Act now to stop toll on health

Mike O'Connor



MONDAY VIEW

WANT to lose weight? Improve your sex life? Stop hair loss? Improve your physique? Lower your blood pressure? Raise your IQ? Lower your cholesterol?

Just slip along to your local supermarket and you'll find a product which implies it can achieve all of the above, or at least you will, if the Australian Food and Grocery Council has its way.

Rewind to 2002 when deliberations began on the creation of regulations, administered by Food Standards Australia New Zealand, which would require all health claims made on food packaging to be pre-approved.

You may have thought, naively, that this was already the case but it is not. At least, however, the issue was being addressed, albeit at a glacial pace, and this month after

more than 10 years of talks between the standards organisation and the food manufacturing industry, a draft report was finally completed.

Joy of joys! Finally, the intellectually vulnerable among us were to be protected from the wild assertions of unscrupulous marketers.

The joy, alas, was shortlived because the Food and Grocery Council, after a decade of discussion, dismissed the draft, which would have meant that any health claim made on a food product would first have to be approved.

The food marketers had a better idea, better that is, for them. How about, they said, they be allowed to make any claim they liked as long as it was supported by their own research, research conducted by people paid by them.

Gee. What could be fairer than that - this being the packaging equivalent of being

asked to report yourself for speeding?

The council, in refusing to endorse the standards, claimed that they would cost too much to implement.

For too long, food marketers have been allowed to make spurious claims endowing their products with extraordinary qualities, advertising copy writers competing to see who could make the most outlandish health claim.

You probably dismiss them all, as I do, as wild hyperbole but there are many who are taken in by these claims. If the practice did not lead to more sales then the advertising agencies wouldn't pursue it.

The aim is to convince people that the product they are buying, which may be oozing sugar and dripping with fat, "could" be good for them. Most people need little encouragement to buy products

that are intrinsically unhealthy, the merest hint that they may contain some nebulous health benefit being sufficient for them to be scooped in to the grocery cart.

You could argue that people should be able to make their own decisions, given that there is no suggestion that the products pose an immediate health risk but rather that the advertising is misleading.

Perhaps, but the unpalatable truth is that fat Australians are eating themselves to death and leaving it to the rest of us to pay the bill.

Type 2 diabetes, the 21st century pandemic and largely preventable by following a reasonable diet and exercise program, will affect 3.5 million Australians within the next 20 years and is soaring in line with increased obesity levels.

An estimated 275 people





develop the disease in this country every day and at least 680,000 of us have the disease and are as yet unaware of it.

Diabetes Australia says the Federal Government's failure to act on this surge in the disease had left the nation "on the brink of disaster".

Currently, the condition is estimated to cost the country about \$12 billion a year. The only thing the Government has done has been to scrap a \$200 million program which provided a six-week course in dietary and exercise changes for people with high risk diabetes factors.

There's a flow-on effect in play here for diabetes affects

the kidneys. It can also lead to amputations, particularly of the feet and legs as well as blindness.

It's the effect on kidneys, however, which is draining the health budget for the number of people being treated for kidney disease has tripled since 1992.

There are now about 20,000 Australians on dialysis at a cost, according to Kidney Health Australia's Dr Tim Mathew, of about \$55,000 per patient per year.

"It's hugely expensive by any criteria and, of course, it goes on," he told ABC Radio.

"It's not a one-off chemotherapy course that might cost \$80,000. It's a repeating

cost for the duration of a person's life. We're spending a billion dollars a year at the current time on existing dialysis programs. That number is projected to almost double over the next decade."

Meanwhile, the federal parliamentary secretary for health, Catherine King, has declined to comment on why, after 10 years, the plan to enforce honesty in food advertising had hit the wall.

She had, she said, asked the food regulation standing committee to "develop options for consideration".

What's to consider? A claim is genuine or it is not. It can be verified or it cannot.

The executive manager of

the Obesity Policy Coalition, Jane Martin, says the health claims made in advertising have a significant impact on consumer's buying decisions and they need to be "transparent, verifiable and honest".

We can't protect people from their own stupidity and weakness but we can shield them from misleading food advertising.

Ten years of talk is enough. The Government needs to regulate and enforce, and do so now.

occonnorm@couriermail.com.au

