



Children lured to unhealthy food

Call to ban cartoon-character marketing

By **DEBORAH GOUGH**

CARTOON characters such as the Paddle Pop lion and Freddo Frog are increasingly being used across media platforms to lure children to unhealthy foods and should be banned, a health coalition says.

While falling short of calling for “plain packaging” on sugary and fatty foods, the Obesity Policy Coalition has said the federal government should ban marketers from using cartoon characters and giveaway toys to promote junk and unhealthy foods.

Spokesman Boyd Swinburn said cartoon characters were the common factor used to draw children to fattening foods and drinks but companies were now using free online games, apps, movies and other new media to promote unhealthy food.

“Cartoon characters and toy giveaways are certainly the hook used to draw children in,” Dr Swinburn said. “It is a huge battle akin to the battle with tobacco over plain packaging and no one would have believed that was possible even a few years ago.”

Dr Swinburn said self-regulation had failed because some companies refused to sign up to industry codes and loopholes often allowed companies to escape criticism.

Deakin University senior lecturer Paul Harrison said the food industry had allowed stricter rules on traditional advertising – whose power is on the wane – while developing

online games, movies, product giveaways and health sponsorships. These platforms “flew under the radar” of regulators, Dr Harrison said.

In *Advances in Communication Research to Reduce Childhood Obesity*, Dr Harrison looked at the integrated marketing campaigns used for Nutri-Grain, Freddo Frogs and McDonald’s Happy Meals and how they appealed to children. He said marketers often cleverly did not use logos, to avoid criticism, but instead used characters and colours associated with their products.

“Children are not stupid, they can work out the association



between a character and a product from a very young age, even if they are not together at the time,” he said.

In one website, children were encouraged to create their own avatar to interact with Freddo Frog, to play games, puzzles and do other activities. The company also used child-size displays in stores, Christmas stockings, party cakes and chocolate fund-raising drives through schools and childcare centres. “These companies try to say that they are not advertising to children, but of course they are,” Dr Harrison said.

He said advertising and industry code regulators were failing to keep up with technology and marketing changes.

He said a single authority should look at

whether marketing was designed to appeal to children regardless of the medium.

He said other examples included a free movie DVD giveaway featuring an adventure story with the Paddle Pop lion as the lead character, and Gatorade, which had been allowed to promote “hydration” to school children in Victoria.

The Australian Food and Grocery Council represents packaged food, drink and grocery products manufacturers. A spokesman said increased regulation overseas had not reduced childhood obesity.

“We’re surprised the OPC hasn’t also demanded a ban on Santa Claus, who generally looks suspiciously chubby,” he said. “But seriously there is a need for more positive, creative and collaborative approaches that will actually work, rather than blanket bans.”