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Policies on Restriction of Food Advertising During Children's Television Viewing Times: An International Perspective

KEY WORDS: childhood obesity; television advertising; food advertising; food marketing

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Abstract

Issue addressed: The variation in food advertising legislation and guidelines between various countries, and how these policies relate to obesity levels of children in those countries.

Method: A review of legislation and regulatory measures for food advertising during children's television viewing times compared to childhood obesity across countries that are part of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Results: Four different types of food advertising restrictions emerged. These ranged from a total ban of food advertising to children; restrictions on the type of food advertised; restrictions on the number of advertisements; and designating specific time slots where food advertisements could be aired.

Conclusion: Children in Australia require better protection from television advertisements for energy-dense and low-nutrient foods. There is a need for several other industrialised nations to rethink their position in relation to food advertisements that are targeted to children and embrace the World Health Organisation's recommended guidelines. While policies on food advertisements exist in different countries, many government policies are not strong enough to promote positive health outcomes. Children's continuous contact with unhealthy food advertisements through media suggests that current policies are not sufficient enough to impact upon the rising rates of childhood obesity.

Introduction

Obesity as a health issue

Overweight and obesity is one of the most important emerging health issues of our time, and is regarded by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a worldwide epidemic.¹ The WHO estimates that about 1.6 billion adults aged over 15 were overweight, and at least 400 million adults were obese in 2005. Excessive bodyweight has been identified as the sixth most important risk factor that contributes to the burden of disease globally.² In 2005 overweight surpassed smoking as the major avertable cause of premature and preventable death in the USA.³ The World Health Organisation predicts that by 2015 approximately 2.3 billion adults will be overweight, and more than 700 million adults will be obese.⁴

Obesity rates in children

It is estimated that more than 10% of children around the world are overweight, mounting to over 30% in several industrialised economies.⁵ Childhood obesity has accelerated sharply in recent decades. The International Obesity Task Force estimates that at least 155 million school-aged children are obese which accounts for one in ten children.⁵ Twenty two million children under the age of 5 are either overweight or obese.⁵

In Australia the prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents has increased over the last 20 years.⁶ For example, the prevalence of overweight in boys aged 4 years rose from 7% to 13.2% and the prevalence of overweight in girls grew from 9.3% to 15.6% from 1995 to 2002.⁷ Although the prevalence of overweight and obesity is lower in children than in adults, obese children are more likely to become obese adults. In addition overweight children are at increased risk of type 2 diabetes, hypertension, respiratory ailments, sleep problems, and depression.⁸

Television advertising and obesity in children

Obesity rates are influenced by a variety of genetic, behavioural and environmental factors.⁹⁻¹¹ Aside from genetics, the main contributing factors are physical activity and food intake. Recent increases in obesity rates stem from decreased physical activity and increased consumption of energy dense, low nutrient foods. Societal changes have created the contributing environmental conditions such as media targeted to children, reduction in physical activities, unhealthy food sold in school canteens, and the growth of fast-food outlets.⁸ For instance according to the American Academy of Paediatrics, in the United States (US) children see 40,000 commercials each year.¹² Moreover it is estimated that children spend an average of 5.5 hours a day using media which could include television shows, DVDs and videos, computer games and internet related activities.⁸

There is a relationship between food advertising and children's food choices.^{13,14} Children can influence parents with respect to what they want to eat and what they want to buy.^{15,16} It is estimated that in the US, Coca-Cola annually spends around \$1.5 billion in advertisements, McDonalds spends \$1.2 billion, Nestle spends \$1.9 billion and Pepsi spends about \$0.7 billion.¹⁷

Organisations such as the Coalition on Food Advertising to Children (CFAC) and the World Health Organisation, argue that tougher restrictions for food advertising are essential to address the mounting crisis of childhood obesity on the basis that exposure to junk or fast food advertising contributes to an atmosphere that encourages children to eat unhealthy foods.^{18,19} Others argue that there is not much evidence to show a relationship between advertising and obesity, and therefore advertising limitations are not a suitable means to address childhood obesity.²⁰ Even though the causes of childhood obesity are multi-factorial, a decrease in food advertising through media is one vital approach for encouraging children to make right food choices.²¹

The terminology used to describe 'child' varies between countries. The terms in use include 'child', 'children', 'young children', 'young people', 'teenagers', 'small children' and 'minors'. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as "every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier".²² In fact the age of majority differs between various OECD countries. Table 1 shows the age definition of 'child' in selected countries:

Country	Age
Australia	≤14 yrs
New Zealand	≤14 yrs
United Kingdom	≤15 yrs
United States of America	≤17 yrs
Canada	≤15 yrs
Sweden	≤12 yrs
Norway	≤12 yrs

The aim of this paper is to provide a synopsis of the restrictions on food advertising during children's television viewing times in selected OECD countries. A summary of the nature and extent of food marketing to children and childhood obesity rates of these selected countries will be discussed.

Method

Journal articles, policy documents and commentaries were sourced through academic databases which included PubMed, Medline, CINAHL, ProQuest and the internet search engine Google Scholar. A search was performed in the databases that included key words, television advertising policy, nutrition policy, obesity, overweight, children, fast food and soft drinks. After the relevant articles were reviewed, the sources were organized and analysed.

Results

Television food advertising in United States of America

There are few guidelines in the US governing food advertising targeted at children. The Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) is a program established by the National Advertising Review Council (NARC) to endorse socially responsible children's advertising. CARU's self-regulatory program contains high principles for different industries to guarantee that advertising that is directed to children is not misleading, excessive or unsuitable for children.²³ The CARU guidelines apply only to children under 12 years of age. The guidelines state that²³

- the quantity of food should not exceed the serving size shown on the Nutrition Facts panel;
- food advertised should be in a such a way that it is focused to the health and well being of a child.

CARU's guidelines have no lawful authority over food advertisers and can only request for voluntary compliance. CARU is supported by a group of many food industries like McDonald's, Burger King, Cadbury Schweppes, Coca-Cola and others.²⁴ The paradox that arises is how an organisation like CARU which is mainly comprised of billion dollar turnover food marketers could seek compliance from its supporters.

In the US, 15% of youth are overweight.⁸ Children generally watch an average of two hours of television daily between the age group of two to seven years; 3.5 hours of television when they are in grade school; and 2.75 hours of television in late adolescence.²⁵

With respect to advertising, one study found that 57% of all advertisements that were aired during children's program time on weekends were food advertisements. Forty Six percent of all the advertisements that were aired included food high in fats and sugars/salts and 11% included fast food restaurant advertisements.²⁶

Television food advertising in United Kingdom

The Office of Communications (Ofcom) is the peak body responsible for all media communications including advertising through media in the UK. In July 2007, Ofcom introduced new regulations describing the advertisement of food and drink products to children.²⁷ Under the new regulations, there is a total prohibition of advertising food that is high in fat, sugar/salt which are targeted to children aged 9 years and less.²⁷ From January 2008, the regulation became more stringent, with no advertisements for food that are high in fat, sugar/salt aired to children aged 15 years and less.²⁷ This food advertisement prohibition is applicable to all cable and children's satellite television channels. Moreover, advertisers are restricted in promoting the use of celebrities or cartoon characters and using free gifts as incentives to children when advertising foods that are high in fat, sugar/salt.²⁷

With respect to body weight, the Health Survey of England (HSE) in 2004 found that 16% of 2-10 year boys and 11% of girls were obese.²⁸ In 2004 1 in 4 children in the age group of 11-15 year were considered obese.²⁸ In UK, children watch an average of 2.42 hours of television per day.²⁹

Television food advertising in Canada

The Canadian Code of Advertising Standards (CCAS) applies to all forms of advertising in Canada (except in the province of Quebec). The Broadcast Code for Advertising to Children (BCAC) complements the existing CCAS regulations. The BCAC code is to guide potential advertisers of what is prohibited when children are their target audience. The BCAC codes are only applicable to children under 12 years of age. Clause 11 'social values' of the BCAC regulations in relation to food products state that³⁰

- advertisements must not be advertised in such a way that it shows to a child that they are an substitute for meals;
- advertisements ought not be portrayed in such a way that it becomes excessive for a person to consume;
- the quantity of food shown should not exceed the labelling or serving size.

Since 1978 Quebec is the only province in Canada which bans all advertisements targeting children aged 12 years and less. Sections 248 of the Consumer Protection Act states that "no person may make use of commercial advertising directed at persons under thirteen years of age".³¹ The Consumer Protection Act bans advertising of products like toys and foods.³¹ Moreover, this legislation is applied to commercial advertising only. Learning and educational advertising is allowed, provided it acts in accordance with certain terms and conditions.

Data from the 1981 and 1996 surveys show that there is a high increase of obesity rates among children in Canada. In boys there was an increase from 10.6% to 32.6% and in girls it was from 13.1% to 26.6% for overweight.^{32,33} For obesity the rates in boys increased from 2.0% to 10.2% and from 1.7% to 8.9% in girls.^{32,33} It is evident from the above figures that from 1981 to 1996 overweight and obesity tripled amongst boys and doubled amongst girls. The greatest increase was seen in the age group 7-9 years.^{32,33}

In Canada, children between the age group of 2 to 11 years watch an average of 14.1 hours of television every week which equates to 2.1 hours/day.³⁴ The average child sees about 350,000 television advertisements before graduating from high school.³⁴ In 1998, over \$720 million were spent to advertise about restaurants, food and beverages in Canada.³⁵ One television programming survey found that less than 9% of food advertisements were of diary products, fruits and vegetables.³⁶

Television food advertising in Sweden

Sweden has some of the most restrictive television policies among the industrialised nations in relation to protecting children. In contrast by any global benchmark, Sweden is a society where people have the right to exercise personal freedoms. The Swedish Radio and TV Authority is the national body responsible for all radio and television broadcasting. Since 1991, all television advertisements directed to children under 12 is banned under the Radio and Television Act 1996.³⁷ Moreover, all advertisements (food, toys and all other products) before or after children's programs are banned.³⁷ The Swedish control on advertising to children is widely supported by the Swedish people. It is also supported by the Swedish consumer organisations. In addition, the act does not allow individuals or characters to be involved in any sort of advertisements that are directed to children under 12 years of age.³⁷

The rationale given by the Swedish government in relation to this ban is that children under the age of 12 cannot distinguish between advertising messages and program content. Hence, there is a greater chance that they could get influenced by any form of advertisements. This does not mean that children in Sweden are not subject to any form of advertisements. As satellite television programs are aired from other parts of Europe to Sweden, these programs are subject to the respective countries regulation and these bring all sorts of advertisements to the Swedish community where children are prone to exposure.³⁸ Moreover, the ban is applicable only to broadcast media and is not applicable to other marketing activities.³⁷

Obesity has increased in Sweden to 18% in 2001 compared to the data in 1990. The study showed that 26.3% of girls and 20.2% of boys were obese.³⁹ In 1999, 97% of Swedish children and adolescents between the ages of 9 and 16 watched an average of more than 2 hours of television/day.⁴⁰ According to a recent study an average of 19% of boys between 11 and 15, and 17% of girls viewed television for at least four hours/weekday.⁴¹

Television food advertising in Norway

Norway also bans advertisements that are aimed at children during children's television programs. The Norwegian Media Authority is the administrative agency for broadcasting and the Ministry of Church and Cultural Affairs is responsible for implementing legislative policies in relation to broadcasting. The legislation relating to broadcasting states that advertisements should not be aired during children's television viewing times and should not aim at children.⁴² Like Sweden, it prohibits persons or figures to be involved in any sort of advertisements that are directed to children.⁴²

In Norway, about 21% of 8-12 year children are either overweight or obese.⁴³ The overall incidence of overweight and obesity in Norwegian boys were found to be 12.5% and 2.1% and in girls it was 14.8% and 2.9%.⁴⁴ It is estimated that children in Norway watch about 2 hours of television/day.⁴⁵

Television food advertising in Australia

One in five children in Australia are either overweight or obese.⁴⁶ From 1985 to 1995, the rate of obesity has tripled in boys and girls in all age groups.⁴⁷ In Australia about 30% of advertisement shown during children's television viewing time is about food.⁴⁸ A study among 13 developed countries found that Australia had the highest amount of food advertisements per hour.⁴⁹ Other studies have also shown similar results.⁵⁰⁻⁵²

The two advertising regulations that operate in Australia include the 'Children's Television Standard' and the 'Free TV Australia Commercial Television Code of Practice' which is also called as the Commercial TV Code.⁵³ The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) is the peak body responsible for enforcing the Commercial TV Code and Children's Television Standard.⁵³ The Commercial TV Code has accepted the Australian Association of National Advertisers (AANA) code for advertising to children which states that, advertisements targeted to children for food/beverages⁵⁴

- should not persuade a child to choose detrimental eating/drinking behaviour;
- ought not to have any inaccurate information in relation to the dietary value of the product.

The Commercial TV Code of Practice regulates the content of commercial television. Programs designed for primary school aged children are classified as a 'C' programs and programs for pre-schoolers are classified as 'P' programs.⁵⁵ In 2006, C programs were broadcasted throughout the week from 1600-1630 every weekday.⁵⁵ Some networks broadcast C programs on Saturday and on Sunday mornings too. The P programs were generally broadcasted from 0900-0930 and on weekday's afternoon from 1530-1600.⁵⁵ Advertisements are limited to a 10 minutes/hour in C classified programs and no advertisements are permitted in P classified programs.⁵⁵

Both the Commercial TV Code and the Children's Television Standard code lack clear-cut description with regard to breach of regulations. Moreover, the type of food that can be advertised is not presently regulated in Australia. This has provided a window of opportunity for many fast food outlets to advertise in these time slots. Chapman et al. showed that 81% of food related advertisements aired on Australian television had low nutritional value.⁵⁶ Most of these foods were high in fat, sugar or salt.⁵⁶ The average unhealthy food advertisements that were aired on television were 4.13 per hour.⁵⁶ Furthermore, one study showed that there was a significant increase in food advertisements aired on TV during school holidays compared to the school period.⁵⁷ Moreover, all of these food advertisements were aired during children's television

programming period, and consisted of food high in fat, sugar and salt, and were of low nutritional value.⁵⁷

Television food advertising in New Zealand

In New Zealand, the Advertising Standards Authority is the peak body that is responsible for the advertising standards. The Advertising Code of Practice includes the code of advertising for food. The code states that advertisements that are targeted to children should⁵⁸

- not persuade children to eat or drink other than the necessary amounts that is possible;
- not persuade children to depend on fast foods in exchange for their customary meal;
- not use a notable movie person or groups, pop person to promote food;
- not depict food that are high in fat, sugar/salt in any way that suggest they are valuable for health.

A Children's Nutrition Survey conducted in 2002 showed that about one-third of New Zealand children between 5-14 years was overweight (21%) or obese (10%).⁵⁹ In New Zealand, 25% of all advertisements that are shown on television relate to food.⁵⁷ One study found that the average rate of food advertised on New Zealand television was 8.4 per hour.⁵⁷ The study also showed that 84% of the advertisements were of low nutritional value.⁵⁷ New Zealand ranked number one among thirteen other countries in relation to the number of advertisements shown in relation to confectionery and aerated drinks.⁵⁷ In 2003, AC Nielsen media research showed that three food and beverage giants, namely, McDonald's, Coca-Cola and Cadbury confectionary spent more than \$NZ 34 million on television advertisements.⁶⁰ Thirty percent of all New Zealand children spent two or more hours in a day watching television.⁶¹

World Health Organisation's perspective on food advertising to children

At an international level, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has condemned food and beverage advertisements that exploit children's innocence. In its 'Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health', the WHO stated that advertisement messages that persuade unhealthy dietary habits or physical inactivity should not be encouraged.⁶² The WHO called upon governments of different countries to work with different stakeholders from communities and industries to develop suitable methods to deal with the advertising of food to children.

The 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' (UNCRC) necessitates that children should be protected from economic exploitation and describes how advertising organisations should not take advantage of the gullibility of children.⁶³ The convention furthermore states that children have the right to adequate food and these should be beneficial to their health and well-being.⁶³ WHO recognizes that unhealthy food product marketing affects children and therefore the UNCRC would apply to all persons aged under 18. The World Health Organisation's four recommended policy includes⁶⁴

- prohibiting advertising of energy-dense, micronutrient-poor food products at particular settings using specific methods or targeting a particular age group;
- prohibiting advertising of energy-dense, micronutrient-poor foods and beverages to children;
- prohibiting advertising of all food or drinks to children;
- prohibiting all commercial promotion of any products to children.

Conclusion

Obesity is one of the biggest public health challenges that all countries face today. The epidemic which is now emerging in children will noticeably heighten the burden of ill health unless critical steps with novel approaches are taken based on current trends and evidence. To fight this epidemic, a robust monitoring system is required to put in place to assess the physical measures of every nation's children who are the future of tomorrow. It is evident from the above findings that the seven OECD countries that were discussed in this paper had an increase in overweight and obesity in recent decades. As there is an association between television viewing and childhood obesity, more serious health policies need to be developed to curb this increasing

burden of disease. Many countries need to follow the example of Sweden which totally bans all forms of advertisements to children which shows how Sweden is slowly moving towards embracing the World Health Organisation's recommended policy on food advertising. Similarly, UK is imposing tougher regulations on food advertisements that are targeting children. Other countries like USA, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada (except Quebec) need to do more in relation to protecting their children from the detrimental affects of food advertising that are aired on television. It has been 21 years since all these countries have been signatories to the Ottawa Charter framework given by the WHO in 1986. Even though these OECD countries have well developed economies, one could argue that when it comes to developing healthy public policy not much has been accomplished.

Even though different policies are put in place across many countries in relation to food advertising, governments will still tend to regard obesity not as a major health problem but as a tendency shown to food by an individual. Governments would be reluctant to impose tougher sanctions against food advertising as this could jeopardize millions of dollars collected in tax revenue. This perception ought to transform in order to reduce the threat of obesity and its mortality which is already affecting the future of children all over the world.

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