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21 March 2015

Feature Article

Advertising and Marketing of Unhealthy Food to Children in Fiji

Tough new controls must be introduced to stop food companies marketing unhealthy foods and drinks to our children. The wait and see strategy, allowing the food and beverage industries to experiment with self-regulation will not work. Junk food is a huge contributor to obesity in our children.

The importance of children as consumers cannot be underestimated. Children play an important role in the consumer market by influencing their parents' purchases. Parents prefer choosing healthy options for their children. However, their efforts are being undermined by the huge amount of advertising and promotion of unhealthy food aimed at their children.

Competition between brands is intense. With such intense advertising there is a growing gap between the diet promoted through advertising and that recommended by dieticians. Similarly, parental authority is undermined by the wide discrepancies between what parents tell their children is healthy to eat and what marketers tell children is desirable to eat.

However the escalating investment into food advertising aimed at children demonstrates just how effective advertisements have been on consumer behavior. The food industry uses marketing techniques to encourage regular consumption, repeat purchases and brand loyalty- especially amongst children. This is seemingly true for Fiji, where billboards, posters, signage and painting of shops and school canteens portraying renowned national and international brands and products are blatantly displayed in clear view of the school children either in the school compound or areas directly outside the school compounds. The redeeming feature in almost all advertisement is that the product overwhelms the main purpose, for example, the name of the school or the sign for the school canteen is almost swallowed by the food and beverage advertisements.

Other familiar examples of such marketing include the use of collectable toys, games and contests, advertising and packaging cartoon characters, food shaped and coloured to appeal to children and the use of catchy jingles.

The significance of the impact of marketing on children's diets has been recognized by the World Health Assembly (WHA) in 2010. The World Health Organization (WHO) produced a set of recommendations urging member states to address the exposure and power of marketing foods to children.

Recommendation 5 states:

“Settings where children gather should be free from all forms of marketing of foods high in saturated fats, trans- fatty acids, free sugars, or salt. Such settings include, but are not limited to, nurseries, playgrounds, family and child clinics and pediatric services and during any sporting and cultural activities that are held on these premises.

The Council has been engaged in discussion on marketing of junk food to children in 2008 and 2009. In 2008 the theme was “*Junk Food Generation – Advertising and Marketing of Unhealthy Food to Children in Fiji*”. The focus was on the sale of unhealthy foods in school canteens and absence of a standard on advertising of unhealthy food to children.

In 2009, the theme was “*Say No to Junk Food: Making Parents Responsible*”. The idea was to make parents aware of what their children were eating and drinking to influence healthy choices in school canteens and healthy food in lunch boxes.

The availability of junk food in school canteens and such easy accessibility will mean that the children will have a limited choice of food. Ultimately, they will be tempted to consume unhealthy food.

Meanwhile, worldwide obesity has nearly doubled since 1980. The number of overweight or obese children under 5 increased from 32 million globally in 1990 to 42 million in 2013. Seventy million young children will be overweight or obese by 2025 if the current trends continue.

Children who are obese are much more likely to be obese adults and can suffer long term health problems. It is therefore extremely important to protect our vulnerable children from marketing of unhealthy food.