Dear Sir/Madam

Food advertising to children on TV: an open call for evidence

The British Medical Association (BMA) is a voluntary professional association and independent trade union, representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care.

The Association welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice. This response outlines our view on the role that television advertising plays in the childhood obesity epidemic, and calls for a 9pm watershed restricting the advertising of high fat, salt or sugar (HFSS) products to better protect children and young people.

Doctors have significant concerns about the impact of poor diet on the nation’s health, which is associated with a range of adverse health consequences including increased risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and type II diabetes, and poor dental health. A 2015/16 survey showed that a third of children in Year 6 are overweight or obese. The media has an important role to play in forming attitudes to nutrition and advertising and marketing can have a key influence on dietary choices – particularly of young children. Children and young people are exposed to a range of food and drink marketing tactics that work in combination to influence demand for their products. As part of a comprehensive approach to tackling childhood obesity, action is required to reduce children’s exposure to the marketing and promotion of unhealthy food and drink. Television advertising is a key component of this, although the role of non-broadcast advertising such as advertising delivered through social media also needs to be kept under close consideration by the government and regulatory bodies.

Various experimental studies have explicitly examined the impact of television advertising on children’s dietary preferences and intake, and shown that:
- exposure to television food advertisements can produce an obesogenic food preference response in normal weight children that is typically found in overweight and obese children;
- children who regularly watch television are more susceptible to the effects of food television advertising compared to those who watch less television, and show an increased preference for foods they have seen advertised (particularly for branded foods) following exposure.

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Sent by email to childrensfood@cap.org.uk

Chief Executive: Keith Ward

Registered office: BMA House, Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 9JP.
Listed as a Trade Union under the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974.
- the preferences and purchase requests of children, and their attempts to influence parents’ purchasing decisions, are linked to their exposure to product advertisements. Exposure to food advertising increases food and calorie intake of children, this effect is greatest in obese children, suggesting that they are more responsive to this type of food marketing.

Whilst efforts have been made to address prime-time advertising of HFSS products around children’s programmes, advertising around family programmes, such as national talent competitions, persists. Research commissioned in 2017 by the Obesity Health Alliance (OHA) – of which the BMA is a member – highlighted the extent to which children continue to be exposed to advertising of HFSS food during family shows. It found that the majority of food and drink adverts broadcast during family shows would be banned around children’s programmes, and that children were exposed to high numbers of HFSS ads – up to nine during just 30 minutes of family TV.

We would therefore support revision of the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising to prohibit advertisements of HFSS food in or around any programmes that appeal in any way to children and young people – not just those programmes designated as ‘children’s’. Specifically, we would support measures to ban all HFSS advertisements before the 9pm watershed, as an important part of a comprehensive approach that is required to tackle childhood obesity. Changing viewing habits – particularly the increasing popularity of on-demand services – need to be considered as part of any future regulatory approaches. It will also be important for any new measures to be closely monitored for their effectiveness in reducing children’s exposure to the advertising of HFSS products.

We hope that our submission is useful – please do not hesitate to contact us for more information if required.

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Priest
Head of Public Health and Healthcare
10 Ibid
11 Obesity Health Alliance, A Watershed Moment: Why it’s Prime Time to Protect Children from Junk Food Adverts