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Code won't change what children see on TV

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Food advertising to children is sure to generate some heated debate at this weeks' meeting of Health Ministers. Representatives of the advertising and food industries have been invited to present a draft Food and Beverage Advertising and Marketing Communications Code which they claim will deliver world best practice in industry self regulation. The unfortunate reality is that under this Code there will be little change to what our kids see on their television screens.

The Code won't stop the marketing of unhealthy foods during children's programs, nor will it address the dominance of ads for unhealthy foods versus healthy foods. And it's not just advertising during children's programs that we should be worrying about. Other shows popular with kids such as Australia Idol, Home and Away and the Simpsons, are plastered with junk food ads.

Foods and brands are also promoted to children on the internet and through the use of children's characters, competitions and giveaways on labels and in fast food outlets. The Code is intended to cover this, but how the provisions can be applied to these types of marketing is far from clear.

Childhood obesity is one of our most serious public health problems and it is getting worse. Overweight and obese children are more likely to become overweight or obese adults, placing them at greater risk of developing chronic conditions such as heart disease and diabetes – conditions that already place a substantial burden on the health system. Governments must be prepared to act, even if it means restricting the activities of the food and advertising industries. Parents need effective support in the battle to control their children's diet. Self regulation can only do so much to rein in an industry whose sole purpose is to convince consumers that they can't live without a particular processed food.

A 2005 NSW Health study found that children are exposed to 77 ads for unhealthy foods every week. Chocolate, lollies, fast food and sugary breakfast cereals were the most commonly advertised unhealthy foods. In a recent Newspoll survey conducted for CHOICE magazine, 82% of respondents supported government regulation of food and beverage marketing to children.

State and Territory health ministers have shown interest in exploring ways to protect children from being bombarded with marketing messages for unhealthy foods – including through government regulation. Yet there is a danger that the States could be sidelined as the Commonwealth government appears to have unilaterally made up its mind on the issue. In a media release last week Tony Abbott announced that his plan to “tackle obesity” would ‘support, motivate and educate Australians to build a healthy, active life, not *regulate* or *ban*”.

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Regulating or banning food marketing to children is not the magic bullet that will by itself solve the obesity problem. But in ruling out any further regulation, the Minister is ignoring approaches that have been implemented effectively in other countries. If we want parents to take greater responsibility for what is going into their children's mouths we should at least eliminate some of the obstacles – persuasive ads that lead children to demand sugary cereals, salty snacks and kilojoule-laden soft drinks.

More alarmingly, laying all the blame on parents won't help those children whose parents succumb to the pester power and the toddler tantrums for fries not fruit.