



Dr Patricia Edgar

# Biting off more than we can chew

*Children are targeted relentlessly by fast food companies with irresponsible marketing campaigns. As teachers – your voices should be raised in this debate.*

I sat on the beach last summer observing the parade of bodies, recalling photographs taken of my children playing on that same beach one generation before. The difference was massive. Australians are now among the fattest people on the planet. Twenty per cent of Australian children are overweight and 10 per cent are obese. These young people will battle illness for most of their lives – type 2 diabetes, bone disease, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases. Studies put the cost of obesity in children and adults in Australia in excess of \$21 billion dollars. Researchers are warning that,

for the first time in more than a century, life expectancy may fall. The psychological impact of obesity can be as damaging as the physical effects with many children demonstrating increased levels of stress with effects on their behaviour, concentration, learning ability and mood. I am sure teachers observe these symptoms in classrooms across the state. We are hearing more and more messages about healthy eating but they get lost under the welter of products designed to tempt, which are thrust under our noses. In supermarkets there are lollies, chips, chocolates and biscuits

all on shelves at children's eye level so they can pester their parents. It's not just the amount of food we now eat but also what is in the food – the saturated fats and the quantity of sugar – that make the battle to keep weight within normal range a challenge for many people. The way food and drink is advertised creates confusion about what are the contents of food products and what represents healthy eating. Labels trumpet: 20 per cent less fat; 70 per cent less sugar, but the real meaning is less clear. Children are targeted relentlessly by companies and advertisers with irresponsible

marketing campaigns. Fast foods with high fat, sugar and salt content are linked with promotions for toys, movies and characters. Shrek promoted the 'Belly Bulge Combo' – popcorn, Coke and M&Ms.

610 calories. What was once a 590 calorie McDonald's meal became 1550 calories. We seem to admire excess and extol the newsworthiness of extreme eating habits. Without urgent action our eating and

habits is unclear. ACMA is unwilling to take precautionary action because of the impact on the revenue of the commercial television stations. Industry self-regulation is not working. The obesity crisis requires government intervention by regulation of the food industry, the media industries (both advertising and programming), and the introduction of healthy lifestyle initiatives for all children.

Without urgent action, our eating and exercise habits will lead to a very unhealthy society, and our social and health systems will collapse under the demand for services.

Sophistry bedevils the debate about the food industry's role in the obesity epidemic. The industry insists we should exercise more; the media industries insist it is not their problem, they only offer entertainment. Government calls on parents to be the guardians of their children: they can turn off the telly, say no, refuse to buy, feed their children healthy food. But business conspires against us. Marketers are way ahead of the game as they bring the best minds to bear on ways to access and develop the market. They discovered that people generally would not buy two servings of french fries or two burgers, but they would buy the super size, the value-added meal. Super-sizing led to a revolution in eating. A serving of McDonald's french fries ballooned from 200 calories in 1960 to

exercise habits will lead to a very unhealthy society and our social and health systems will collapse under the demand for services. Prevention is the answer. We should start with television, which has been a defining factor in shaping children's views of the world since the late 1950s: television carries millions of dollars worth of advertisements directed straight at children. In Sweden, television advertising to children under 12 has been banned since 1991. In the UK, television regulator Ofcom banned junk food advertising in and around children's television programs in 2007. But our television regulator, ACMA (Australian Communication and Media Authority), claims the evidence linking food and beverage advertising to children's eating

As with smoking, we may need to put warnings on the packaging of fast food and junk food: "Eating this product may be hazardous to your health." As teachers who see the evidence of overweight children in classrooms every day, your voices should be raised in this debate. ■ Dr Patricia Edgar is an author, television producer, educator and founding director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation. Her latest book is *The New Child: In search of smarter grown-ups*.

Tell us what you think. Email [editor@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:editor@edumail.vic.gov.au)

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