



# THE FAT ATTACK

BANNING CARTOONS FROM CEREAL BOXES AND FAST FOOD ADS FOR CHILDREN WON'T MAKE US A HEALTHIER NATION, ARGUES DIETICIAN JANE BADHAM. LIFESTYLE MODIFICATION EDUCATION – RATHER THAN RESTRICTION AND REGULATION – IS THE ONLY WAY TO SLOW OBESITY RATES



**I**n August, with a great deal of media fanfare – the government published draft food regulations which proposed heavy restrictions on advertising, promotion and nutritional claims on certain foods. Mothers everywhere cheered. No longer was it their responsibility to say no to the cereal with the cartoon character on the box; now the government was taking charge.

Those concerned with burgeoning obesity rates were cheery too, since any attempts to dissuade us from stuffing our faces with kilojoule-rich, nutrient-poor food should be welcomed.

In a statement to the media, the Department of Health said it had identified food-stuffs that were not regarded as essential for a healthy lifestyle; the use of health and nutrition claims for such foods would be prohibited under the proposed regulations and that these foods could not be advertised or promoted to children or on school premises. The draft regulations also set extensive conditions and criteria for nutrition and health claims on food labels and/or their advertising.

The new draft regulations do have some excellent elements tightening up, for example, on allergy issues and ensuring that even imported foods give a local contact address. But the regulations also go much further and have, instead of food safety, taken as their key focus, nutritional issues.

As a dietician and nutrition scientist who is passionate about evidence-based education on what makes up a healthy diet and lifestyle, I should be the first to welcome

the new regulations on the labelling and advertising of foods. Although I acknowledge that there are some good, even great elements in the regulations, I have many concerns and I'd warn against us jumping at these regulations as being our salvation from obesity and the host of related chronic diseases that are indeed a concern in South Africa.

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#### THE STRATEGY

If the government is concerned and committed to our long-term health and really wants to ensure that we make healthier, wiser, better-for-me choices, then there should be an overall strategy that makes a concerted effort to address all related lifestyle factors, rather than just single out one issue – our food.

Where, for example, is the national South African strategy document for addressing obesity and chronic diseases? If the government has decided that certain foods are, as this draft implies, “non-essential” and must even carry a health warning and be restricted from advertising to children, then I have to ask:

- ▶ Where are the regulations that limit the number of children's television programmes that can be shown on national TV and which take children away from running and jumping and playing outdoors?

- ▶ Where are the mandatory cycle paths, running tracks, parks and green belts – particularly in the new suburbs currently under development – that will allow children to exercise outdoors?
- ▶ Where are the policemen monitoring our parks to ensure that our children can play freely and safely?
- ▶ Where are the rules demanding that

physical education be part of the school curriculum and that ensure that every school has a playing field of some sort?

- ▶ What has happened to the nutrition education that should form part of school curriculums and life skills classes?
- ▶ Where is the health warning on the PlayStation console or iPod?

#### HEALTH WARNINGS

Increasing obesity and chronic disease levels are undoubtedly the result of a much bigger issue than the food that we eat. This does not mean our diets are not important and that the food industry does not have a role to play. But, if the priority is ensuring that we can and do make healthier food choices, then why must certain foods carry a health warning yet it is not mandatory (unless it makes a claim) for all foods to provide us with basic nutritional information that will allow us to

make choices around, for example, energy, fat, sodium and fibre? These regulations still won't necessarily help me pick up two tins of baked beans and choose the one with less sodium because I'm worried about my high blood pressure, or choose between two ready-to-eat meals (unless they fall under the definition of fast food) based on fat content.

And what about kids? Instead of banning a cartoon character from appearing on the packaging of their favourite breakfast cereal, the priority should surely be to ensure that nutrition is included in the school curriculum, again and again; that from the youngest possible age, children get to know how food contributes to health, the role of nutrients, and the need for the still elusive balance, variety and moderation.

There is nothing in science which shows that a burger and chips should never be eaten or that it should carry a health warning; it's about how much and how often, and in context of overall diet and lifestyle. And that's about education.

Yes, there might be elements of "pester power", as the marketing and advertising of products to children is known, that should be curbed (like the free toys that have become common with fast food meals), but I believe this can be addressed through a code of practise that is made widely available and is enforced through self-regulation, consumer power and action, rather than regulations.

### EDUCATION FOCUS

Isn't it time that we as consumers drive this part of the process, rather than relying on regulators who, even with the best regulations in the world, battle to enforce them? I was horrified at a comment on a radio programme recently where a mother said how thrilled she was at the proposed regulations because she couldn't say no to her children when they demanded a fast-food meal which included a toy (see p60 for more on parental responsibility).

Should the government be responsible for saying "no" for that mother? What about the thousands of parents who understand the "treat" concept and for whom the meal with the toy is not an



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everyday dilemma? The government should surely be focusing on education and health promotion among parents so that they understand the key elements contributing to health and the role they should be playing. As the CEO of the 5-a-Day for Better Health Trust, responsible for promoting increased consumption of vegetables and fruit among South Africans, it is distressing that we are expected to do this without receiving a single cent from government. In fact, we have to rely on funding from the very food industry that the government is implying are "the baddies".

Imagine if for every food product sold, there was a one cent levy that went into a fund for health promotion; take it even further and imagine if a one cent levy also came from every toy sale... Imagine the funky and appealing adverts we could develop, using cartoon characters to get kids eating more fruit and veggies! If adults

were educated about nutrition and really understood good health, then they would ensure that their children learnt to drink and receive water as their core beverage rather than soft drinks, which would be kept for treats. And children would be choosing water based on their own knowledge gained through the education system.

### BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION

The key question, therefore, is whether regulations are the starting point or the end point? Will regulations result in behaviour change? I personally doubt it.

Behaviour modification is now considered a science in its own right and unless we address this most fundamental of issues, regulations are of little value and improved health for all just a dream. There are too many pieces in the good-health-bad-habits puzzle to focus on just one aspect – good foods vs bad foods.

At the end of the day, if I've been educated about nutrition and lifestyle, if I've been encouraged to reconsider my habits, perceptions and beliefs and recognise the role food and lifestyle plays in health and disease, then ultimately, shouldn't food regulations be about ensuring that the food I eat is safe and that the information contained on its packaging is true? Surely the rest is up to me?

I believe the carrot is always better than the stick. 🍷