The future of fast-food regulation: new research suggests a novel strategy

To the Editor: The prevalence of obesity in Australia is increasing, with a quarter of Australians currently obese and two-thirds overweight.[1] The fast-food industry is particularly implicated in this, because it offers cheap, high-calorie and low-nutrient food and employs branding that can alter taste preferences.[2]

Despite considerable lobbying from health groups, Australian governments have not elected to regulate the fast-food industry, instead leaving it to self-regulate. Predictably, a recent industry self-regulatory initiative aiming to decrease advertising to children failed.[3] Suggested methods of regulating the fast-food industry have included taxing unhealthy foods, limiting advertising to children, and mandatory nutritional labelling. However, recent research has suggested a more creative solution.

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Instead of restricting the industry, perhaps the effective branding strategies of fast-food companies could be used for health promotion. It has been shown that children prefer food in McDonalds-branded wrapping over the identical item in plain wrapping.[2] Even typically healthy items, like milk and carrots, are preferred when given McDonalds branding. New research has taken

this idea a step further and shown that the branding of a fun, health-themed television show can be used to make healthy foods more appealing.[4]

These findings may motivate a new population-level strategy to reduce obesity. Established fast-food brands could be given incentives to apply their branding to healthy items. This would allow the fast-food industry to contribute to a healthier food environment, while avoiding the market restriction of taxation. Another option is to establish a government-funded enterprise that uses fast-food marketing to sell healthy items. Costs of such ventures may be outweighed by future reductions in health spending.

With regard to obesity, perhaps it is time we started looking on the outside of the box for the solution.

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3 Hebden LA, King L, Grunseit A, et al. Advertising of fast food to children on Australian television: the impact of industry self-regulation. *Med J Aust* 2011; 195: 20-24.

4 Gunnarsdottir I, Thorsdottir I. Should we use popular brands to promote healthy eating among children? *Public Health Nutr* 2010; 13: 2064-2067. ❑