A recent letter to the NZMJ by a food industry executive states that past work (by some of us) was “of historical interest only”. Furthermore, the letter claimed that industry self-regulation of food marketing is “very effective and increasingly so”. But there is evidence that the problem of marketing of unhealthy food in New Zealand remains a long-term, unresolved problem with significant consequences for health. This is shown by a large number of New Zealand studies, including ones published in 2013, 2014, and an unpublished study in 2015 (described in a recent article in this Journal, which also provides a good overview of the food marketing problem).

Furthermore, there are New Zealand examples where self-regulation has clearly failed. One is the inadequate response of the tobacco industry in New Zealand to follow guidelines around advertising, resulting in the Government eventually having to regulate this domain.

Fortunately, New Zealand takes a mandatory regulations approach with many products, including pharmaceuticals, hazardous chemicals, firearms and product safety in general (eg, aspects of car design). Furthermore, the Government used regulatory powers to phase out asbestos imports, lead petrol, and regulations have helped to eradicate various infectious diseases eg, hydatids and brucellosis.

In the food area, New Zealand uses regulations to prohibit microbiological contamination by some micro-organisms (such as Salmonella) and there is the illustrative case of the long-term, food-borne campylobacteriosis epidemic in New Zealand. Major progress in dealing with this epidemic only came once the New Zealand Government started to set regulations around campylobacter contamination levels in fresh poultry. This regulation triggered a marked 54% reduction in disease burden and appears to have also reduced the burden of an associated neurological disease as well.

Given the extent of the obesity epidemic in New Zealand, and its preventable costs to the nation of at least three-quarters of a billion dollars a year, it seems high time to follow these past successful approaches and start mandatory regulation of unhealthy food marketing.

Yet even when regulation is put in place, there is a risk that industry deception can still occur. The recent international situation with Volkswagen and its diesel emissions testing software is illustrative. This suggests that even a very large company may attempt to risk its quality brand value by deceiving regulators.

So, not only should policy-makers be very cautious about industry claims for the value of self-regulation, but given situations like the Volkswagen saga, they should also consider better funding of regulatory science. Mandatory regulations, combined with science-based monitoring may then start to have an impact around further protecting the public from unhealthy products—including the marketing of unhealthy food.
REFERENCES:


