

Victorian Childhood Obesity Prevention Forum, 24 October 2002

## Obesity—Pursuing solutions based on evidence

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Minister, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

I represent the Australian Food and Grocery Council.

The Council is the peak national organisation representing Australia's packaged food, drink and grocery products industry – this nation's largest manufacturing sector.

Our industry is committed to bettering the economic and social welfare of Australians by creating jobs and opportunities for Australians. We employ one in five workers in the manufacturing sector, with half of them in rural and regional areas. We also have an important relationship with the communities in which we operate. And we source more than 90 per cent of the ingredients for our food products from Australian farmers.

Our industry is also close to the consumer. Our products reach every home in Australia. Consumers trust us to provide them with safe food and rely on us to provide them with a range of food products from which they can choose.

We invest significantly in consumer research. We have to. This research is critical to developing an understanding of consumers – their needs, preferences and attitudes – and identifying emerging trends in the market.

The products we develop and the way we market them is based on what consumers want. Taste and enjoyment are paramount. So is cost and safety. But there are other factors too, depending on the consumer segment, such as health and nutrition.

Our industry also makes a significant investment in helping consumers make informed choices about the foods they eat. But we are limited in our ability to do this by government regulations, which prohibit us from saying anything about the health benefits of a product.

The cost of market entry for our companies is the capacity to safely and cost-effectively produce foods that consumers want. Failure to deliver on this results in businesses failure.

Consumer understanding of the link between food, nutrition and health is growing, and this has created a demand for foods with specific health benefits. You only need to travel down a supermarket aisle to see the large number of new foods based on sound nutritional science now available.

Turning to the specific questions asked of us requires some preliminary comments.

Consumers' choice of a specific food is influenced by many factors, including taste, cost, nutrition and availability. Their overall diet is influenced by taste, hunger, appetite, cooking skills, habit, etc., while physical activity is influenced by access, availability, interest, time, etc. The food supply, in contrast, is driven by consumer demand, technology, availability and regulatory requirements.

How can the food industry contribute to the prevention of overweight and obesity? By doing what it knows and does best – communicating truthful messages to consumers.

### **What can the food industry do to increase the availability, accessibility and demand for healthy foods?**

The demand for any food is determined by you, the consumer. Let's take yoghurt as an example. Today you can buy unsweetened, unflavoured, yoghurt; sweetened, unflavoured yoghurt; sweetened, flavoured yoghurt; artificially sweetened, flavoured yoghurt; reduced fat, low fat, and fat free yoghurts in most of the above forms.

Information about the energy and nutrient composition of these foods can be found in the nutrition information panel and it is by this means that consumers can make their personal choice. The popularity of any particular form can be judged usually by the amount of shelf space for a given type on the supermarket shelf.

This wide consumer choice has come about as a result of manufacturers listening to their consumers and testing various combinations with consumer panels for acceptability of taste and texture of the product. However, if you the consumer does not buy the product, it will eventually be withdrawn. Even with careful testing, barely one in a hundred new products go on to become household brands.

Food companies will continue to produce foods that consumers want to eat. They will continue to try new variations, as in the yoghurt example, but if consumers do not purchase those foods, then eventually they will be withdrawn.

One area that could assist food companies to promote healthy diets is if they were allowed to tell consumers about the health benefits of certain foods. Health claims about foods are prohibited in Australia by government regulation.

### **How are the content and preparation methods of foods (including sugar and fat content) decided?**

There are several aspects to this question. There is the technical side, which involves the particular structure of the processed food. For example, can a particular combination of flour, sugar and fat be baked to produce a biscuit that doesn't crumble? How will this alter if wholemeal flour is used? What happens to the texture if the sugar is replaced by an artificial sweetener? Will it stay the same if oil is used instead of fat?

Then there is the consumer side. Does it taste good? Does it provide a good mouth feel? Does it smell nice? Will consumers want to buy it again?

Sugar and fats are not added to foods just because they can be added. Rather, they have structural and functional properties that provide texture and appeal to the food. Simply removing the fat from a food (as in the yoghurt example above) may result in a product that is less appealing to the consumer. Adding extra sweetness returns some of the appeal of the original fat content but with less calories (energy).

So the answer is a complex one relating to the structure of the food and the appeal it has for the consumer but ultimately it comes down to the consumer. If you don't like the "new improved" version, you won't buy it, it won't sell and it will be withdrawn from the market.

### **What role can the food industry play in making information about healthy eating more easily available?**

The food industry has responded to consumer interest in health and quality of life, in those instances where there is sound science to support that interest, in a wide range of activities.

Examples: The production of foods with nutritional attributes such as reduced fat content, higher fibre content, lower sodium, source of omega-3 fatty acids, rich in the vitamin folate.  
The provision of information via a variety of communication channels including on-pack, via the internet, leaflets, magazines, free telephone hotlines.  
Collaboration in healthy lifestyle programs.  
Sponsorship of organisations and associations to allow them to positively influence physical activity and/or nutrition

Our food businesses support a number of nutrition and physical activity programs from primary years through to secondary school, developed in cooperation with education authorities and teachers. They also support sport and fitness activities through sponsorship of programs locally and nationally.

Expenditure by the food industry on nutrition, health and fitness programs has been estimated to be \$139 million over the last 10 years across a total of almost 400 programs and activities. Fifty-seven per cent of these funds were directed to the 2–18 year age group (see Appendix 1).

### **How can food labelling help people to make informed choices about the food they purchase? What about non-packaged and takeaway foods?**

All packaged foods (from 20 December 2002 when the old Food Standards Code is phased out) will contain information about the energy and nutrient content of that food (a nutrition information panel – NIP), so that consumers can make informed choices about their foods.

Many products offer alternatives in the form of reduced energy, reduced fat, reduced salt and high fibre foods. Given the opportunity (currently prevented by government legislation), many manufacturers would also like to inform consumers of other health benefits of their foods through health claims, increasing healthy choices for their customers.

The ability to deliver health messages to consumers is prevented by the prohibition of health claims on or about foods. Permitting the food industry to communicate the health benefits of their products and deliver those messages into every home would help people to make more informed choices about what they eat.

Non-packaged and takeaway foods are not part of this association of food manufacturers and this question is best answered by the regulatory agency, FSANZ.

### **What regulatory controls could be used to control the energy content of foods or does this have to be left up to manufacturers to decide?**

The complexity of any regulatory control of the energy content of foods would make it unworkable in practice but the question is best addressed to the regulatory agency, FSANZ.

The AFGC does not consider this to be a feasible solution, given the need indicated above to meet consumer needs in terms of the taste and appeal of foods. The use of nutrition information panels, that provide consumers with the information about, among other things, the energy and fat content of the food, offers consumers informed choice to meet their particular circumstances.

Our experience and research tell us that consumers like to be provided with choice but they do not like to be told what they should or should not eat.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Australian Food and Grocery Council recommends:

- a broad-based program supported by governments, community groups and industry is needed if sustainable benefits are to be achieved;
- the focus should be on reducing sedentary time to provide lifelong health benefits rather than futile attempts to address the symptom – obesity – as overweight and obesity are markers of sedentariness;
- any recommendation and actions must be evidence-based. Recommendations regarding specific initiatives should include rigorous assessment, including scientific assessment where appropriate, that the outcomes are achievable and will provide net benefit to the community;
- any recommendations/actions should be targeted at those most in need/at risk. (NB. 80–90 per cent of children maintain a healthy weight and there are as many who are seriously underweight as are obese);
- support for soundly based nutrition and health education curricula;
- consideration should be given to reviewing point of sale information in fast food franchises in assisting consumer choice;
- regulatory approval of health claims be expedited to allow the food industry to innovate healthy choices and deliver health messages into every home.

The Australian Food and Grocery Council looks forward to working with governments and interested parties to address this serious health issue in ways that deliver sustainable benefits.

Thank you.

## Appendix 1: Examples of Programs and Activities undertaken or sponsored the Food Industry (currently)

The following information is provided by members of the Australian Food and Grocery Council indicating the extent and variety of support by the food industry for nutrition and physical activity in Australia.

- Support of nutrition education program for the public in general.
- Sponsorship of: a sporting stadium; Netball Vic, NSW and Qld; NSW school sport; major and minor agricultural shows nationally.
- All labelling and marketing either has nutrition or consumption benefits as an underlying theme; small range of products of low GI for people with diabetes; organic products.
- Fun Run Program: A national program involving 400,000 school children in healthy outdoor activities – fun runs or walks. Over the past five years, the program has raised approximately \$6 million for extra resources for primary and secondary schools around Australia.
- Sponsorship of football, basketball, soccer, tennis, golf, cycling, surfing, racing, line dancing, blue light disco, fishing, school sports and kids activities, Little Athletics, rallies, surf life saving, go carts, to name a few.
- Sponsorship of local netball, football and hockey club.
- Nutrition messages via TV, press and on-pack.
- Sponsorship of guest speakers on nutrition.
- Sponsorship of NSW Junior Rugby League, Parramatta Eels Development Squad/Team, Noosa/United Sports Marketing Half Marathon/Triathlon series, Children's Hospital – Open Days, Spina Bifida Week, National Heart Week, Little Athletics, school carnivals/fetes.
- Lunch box recipes for schools.
- High school sports exchange program, hockey club sponsorship.
- Australian Institute of Sport programs (includes education curriculum resource), Dietitians Association of Australia, Junior Cricket School Programs, Kids Tennis, Snow Sports School, Sports Events, Lifesavers Surf Program.
- Support of diabetes groups and the Coeliac Society via products/gifts.
- Range of sponsorships of international events such as Olympics to local sporting clubs. Sponsor of most state sporting bodies. Long-term sponsor of Little Athletics in NSW and Qld. Support for NSW Premiers Scholarships for PE teachers.
- Community support programs such as Healthy Bones week, Dental week. Educational support programs, primary and secondary schools.
- Sporting events and teams –junior golf, basketball, breakfast around the tan, horseracing, tennis, golf, football, and surfing. Children's health – Heartwell Fitness, hospital charities. Sponsorship of disabled athlete.
- Promoting physical activity in kids/families – e.g. playground sponsorship, learning to swim programs, marathon bridge run, City to Surf. Professional sport such as Olympics, touch football, tennis, Institute of Sport. Consumer nutrition education programs such as support of Heart Week, education kits for schools. Sponsorship of health professional organisations/ health professional education. Health/nutrition research.

- Sponsorship of soccer coaches (NSL) to conduct free clinics, sponsorship of athletic coaches to conduct free clinics, sponsorship of VIS Soccer and Athletics programs. Edusport.com – web based system for schools to access free school sports clinics and sporting information, sponsorship of Sports Foundation to provide funds for young sportspeople, sponsorship of various sporting events, Web based information service on research and health benefits of products.
- Nutrition research and nutrition events including conferences, speakers, websites, Little Athletics, Tennis – junior and senior tours, Camp Australia, Sports Dietitians Association/ DAA, School Canteens Product Registration and Award Program, Nutrition Student Awards, Good Sports Day, Heart Research Institute, Jean Hailes Foundation, National Heart Foundation, Life Check vans, Go Grains, Home Economics Institute of Australia, Flinders University, Newcastle University, Sydney University, Nutrition Australia, Nutrition Society, Australian Atherosclerosis Australia, RMIT, University of Wollongong (Smart Foods Centre), Royal Adelaide Hospital, Baker Medical Research Institute, CSIRO, Child Health Research Institute.
- Sponsorship of: football club, swimming club.