

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 161, No. 124

Unhappy meals – Who regulates food advertising for kids?

Food labeling and advertising is a hot topic these days — from whether genetically modified ingredients should be disclosed to when and how companies can make the claims that their products are “all natural.” How companies market and advertise food is a concern for manufacturers, policymakers and consumers — especially parents.

A new study published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine is attempting to renew the debate surrounding standards for advertising children's food and beverages. Currently, the ad industry self-regulates the advertising of food aimed at children primarily through the voluntary compliance with the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, a program established by U.S. food and beverage companies to encourage healthy diets for children 12 and under.

The study, “Alignment of Children's Food Advertising With Proposed Federal Guidelines,” published in the June AJPM and posted online April 7, asserts that the industry's self-regulation efforts fall far short of what's needed, however, based on a set of stricter draft standards.

The draft standards were proposed in 2011 by the Interagency Working Group on Foods Marketed to Children — a group comprising representatives from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Agriculture, Federal Trade Commission and Food and Drug Administration.

The standards call for government oversight on the children's food and beverage advertising industry and strictly limits the amount of saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and added sugars in the foods that companies could advertise to children. The AJPM study attempts to rekindle the debate over the need for regulation, the advertising industry's ability to balance social concerns with its own economic viability and the



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effectiveness of its self-regulation efforts.

The 2011 draft proposal advocated for limits of 1 gram or less of saturated fat, less than 0.05 grams of trans fat, 210 milligrams or less of sodium and 13 grams or less of added sugars per individual product serving size.

The IWG advocated that the advertising industry meet the proposed nutrition guidelines for children 2 to 17 by 2016, except for the sodium recommendation, for which the group suggested an interim date of 2016 and a final deadline of 2021. Compliance with the guidelines — which were never adopted — would have been voluntary.

Many food industry groups and manufacturers criticized the IWG standards as overly stringent, unattainable and unsupported by science. The food industry groups claimed that the proposed definitions, which would incorporate

(C)hild-targeted food advertising remains strongly biased toward less healthy options.”

the 20 categories of advertising, marketing and promotional activities identified in the FTC's food marketing study definitions, would prohibit virtually all advertising of the products being marketed to children.

Congress ultimately voted to delay action to study the cost of any advertising limitations.

Despite the fact that the IWG's standards were never adopted, the AJPM study attempted to measure the extent to which televised food advertisements targeting children 12 years old and younger complied with the proposed IWG guidelines for saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and added sugars.

Researchers recorded a total of 354 food-related commercials airing during children's television shows on five national broadcast networks and two cable channels from February to April 2013. Analysis of the commercials revealed that 94 percent met the IWG guidelines for trans fat, 68 percent for sodium, 62 percent for saturated fat and 20 percent for added sugar.

While most of the commercials met the IWG guidelines in at least one category, overall, only 14 percent of the commercials met all four guidelines.

“These findings,” the study concludes, “suggest that child-targeted food advertising remains strongly biased toward less healthy options. Policymakers wishing to regulate food marketing should understand the amount and types of advertisements that children view.”

The CFBAI maintains its advertising standards are sufficient.

Launched in 2006 by the Council of Better Business Bureaus, the CFBAI's goal is to “shift the mix of advertising messaging directed to children under 12 to encourage healthier dietary choices and healthy lifestyles.”

CFBAI's “category-specific uniform nutrition criteria” sets limits for saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and total sugars across 10 categories, including juice; dairy products; grain, fruit and vegetable products; soups and sauces; meat, fish and poultry products; mixed dishes; and seeds, nuts and spreads.

Categories include main dishes, small meals and full meals including a beverage. According to the CFBAI, its 17 member companies — which all have agreed to abide by the CFBAI's nutrition guidelines — produce most of the TV food advertising to children (80 percent of child-directed food advertising is by a single CFBAI member.)

Not surprisingly, the CFBAI is critical of the new study.

Elaine D. Kolish, the CFBAI director and vice president of the Council of Better Business Bureaus, said in a May 9 statement, “The research tool used in this report is significantly flawed, making the results inaccurate and inherently meaningless.”

Kolish points out that the criteria used do not reflect government nutrition recommendations set out in either the Dietary Guidelines for Americans or the government's standards for foods served to children in the school breakfast and school lunch programs.

While parents are ultimately responsible for what their children eat and drink, the AJPM study may ignite a new dialogue on the roles that regulation, education and accountability should play in children's health issues.

The study also raises questions about who should be included in the creation of dietary standards for children and enforcement of those standards. Whether the key players in the public and private sectors will take advantage of the opportunity remains to be seen.