State action on junk food and alcohol ads a prod for federal action

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) has congratulated the Queensland Government for its plan to phase out junk food and alcohol advertisements on government owned sites from the rail network to bus shelters, roadsides and major hospitals.

Queensland now joins the Australia Capital Territory (ACT), Victoria and Western Australia (WA) in moving to protect children from alcohol industry advertising.

The ACT was also the first to ban junk food advertisements on its buses in 2017. That jurisdiction did not see a drop in advertising revenue, meaning the measure is neutral or low cost but potentially good for public health in the long run.

"The Queensland ban will make a difference by protecting children from exposure to harmful marketing that we know drives consumption," said PHAA CEO Terry Slevin.

More than a quarter of all Australian children aged 5-17 years are overweight (20.2%) or obese (7.4%). PHAA research on this is extensive.

"Banning unhealthy food and beverage ads is not going to solve the problem on its own but it is an essential first step," said respected public health nutritionist and PHAA member, Dr Rosemary Stanton.

"Banning these ads is a fairly easy first step because it doesn't cost state governments any revenue."

Slevin and Stanton called on other states to do more and for the Commonwealth to step up by taking a stronger interest in and action on childhood obesity.

"Marketing and promotion of unhealthy food and beverages to children can influence their life long food choices. Voluntary measures have failed to protect children from current and future public health impacts of poor diet," Mr Slevin said.

An unregulated area where the federal government can make a difference is in the digital gaming space and what's called ‘advergaming’.

"Advergaming is the most iniquitous way to get to children. Computer games deliberately designed for children have inbuilt references to dozens of products. The Commonwealth could do something in this area," said Dr Stanton.

"We know it’s getting worse as we see more children use their devices."

Television and digital marketing should be addressed with a national approach.

Understanding this is a hot topic, the PHAA will host an Unhealthy Marketing to Children Forum in mid-June.

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